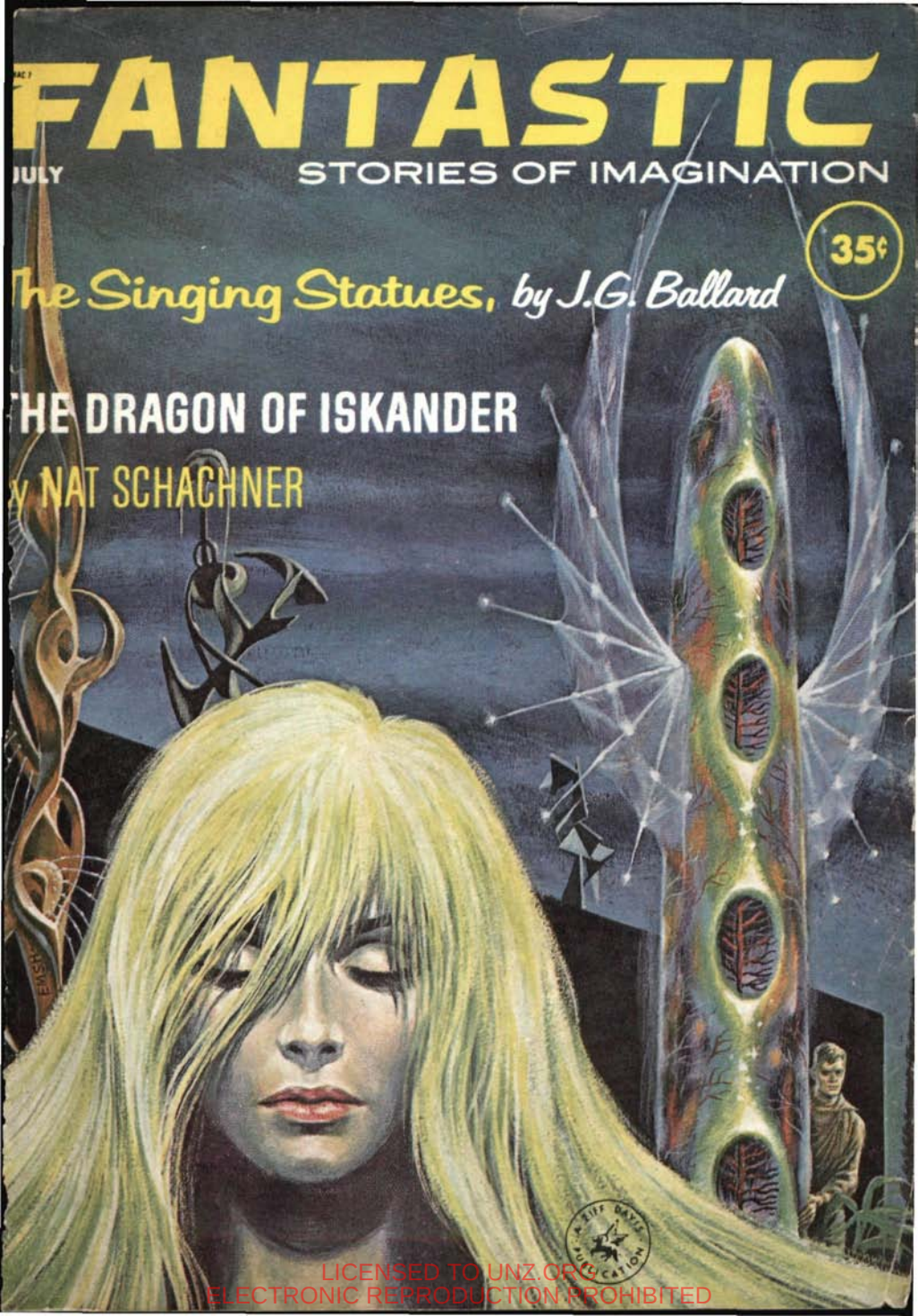

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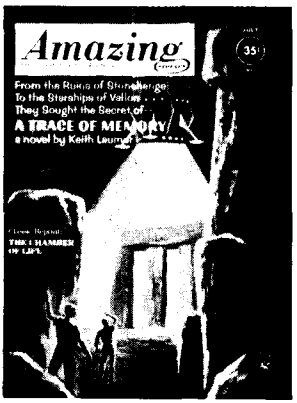

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

JULY 1962
Volume 11 Number 7

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Illustrating *The Singing Statues*

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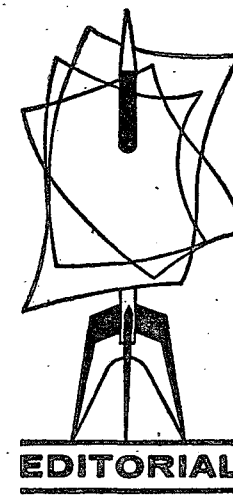

I AM becoming seriously concerned about the decline in the stability of our values. Constants, for example, don't seem to be constant any more. A Physics professor named Robert H. Dicke, who has for some time been lecturing on "Are the Physical Constants Constant?" theorized recently that gravity, which I had always considered one of the old stand-bys, may be growing weaker.

His theory rests on the assumption that as the universe grows older, far distant matter may have an increasing effect on the force of gravitation at any given point in the universe. This is not primarily a matter of distance. It is more a matter, says Dr. Dicke, of time. As the universe ages, there is more time during which gravitation can travel through space. This allows increasing amounts of distant matter to exert the influence of their mass on gravitational force.

It is predicted that experiments may prove, within five years, whether gravity—like man—weakens as time passes. But meanwhile we can worry over the fallibility of other so-called constants. For instance, *does* a young man's fancy always turn toward thoughts of love in the springtime? As the equinoxes precess, and official Spring eventually begins just about when the first snows fall, will young men continue to think of romance at the proper moment?

Will death and taxes continue to be the only inevitabilities? Well, probably the answer is "yes" for taxes, and "no" for death, as we approach the threshhold of quondam immortality via organ banks, etc.

I am taking no chances on gravity weakening. Magnetic heels go on my shoes this very night, and if any of you wish to join me in investing in the Magnet Shoe Corporation, which I am forming shortly, just send me a few gold ingots. I'm afraid cash or checks might float up and away.

—NL.

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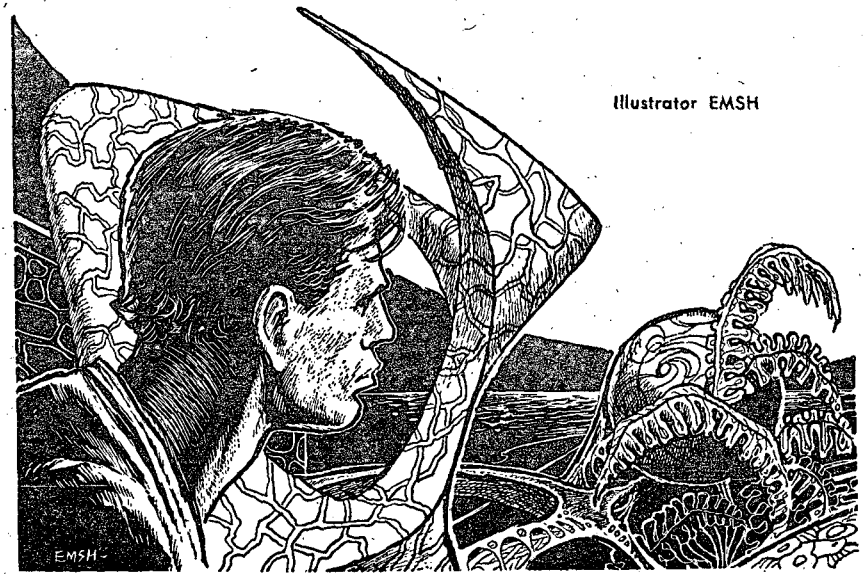
the Singing Statues

By J. G. BALLARD

The Singing statues carried a message of love to Lunora Goalen. For one man, the question was: from whom does the message come?

AGAIN last night, as the dusk air began to move across the desert from Lagoon West, I heard fragments of music coming in on the thermal rollers, remote and fleeting, echoes of the



Illustrator EMSH

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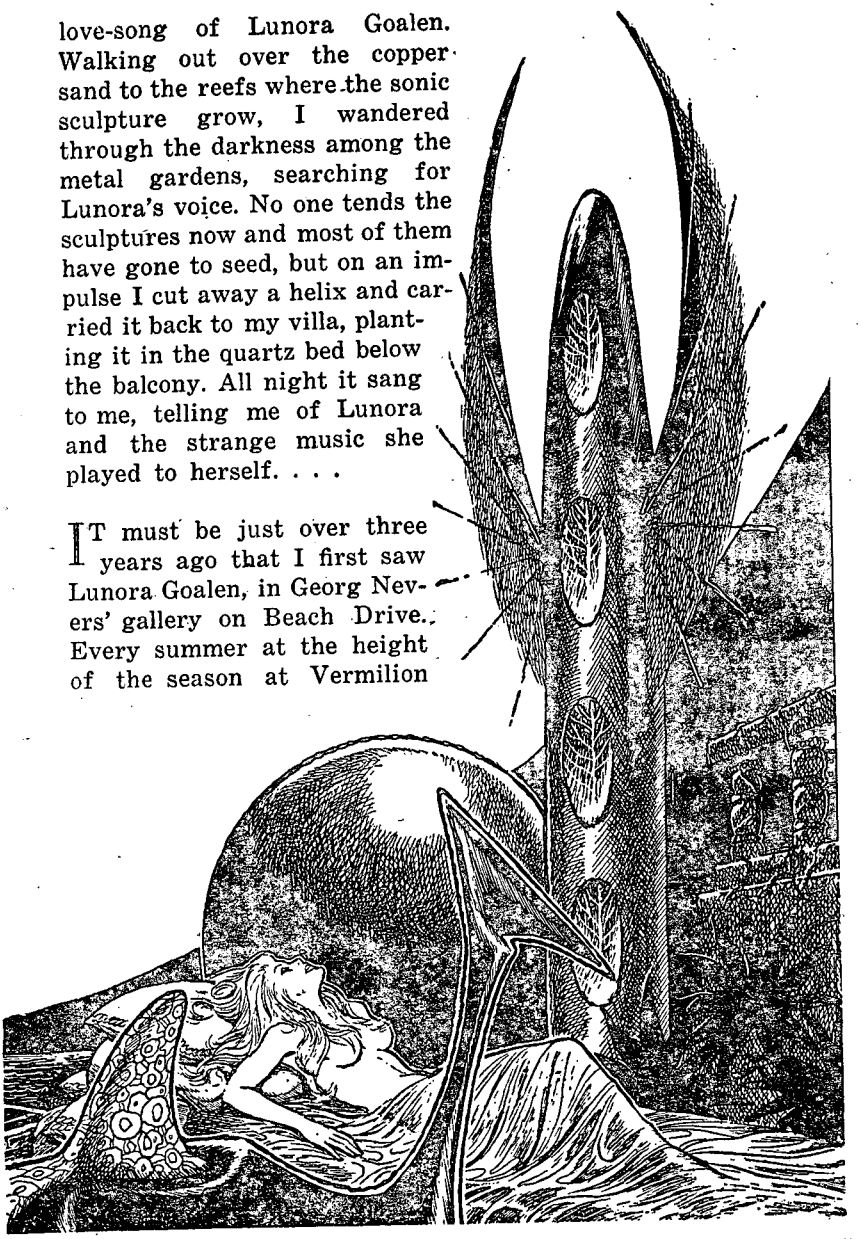
love-song of Lunora Goalen. Walking out over the copper sand to the reefs where the sonic sculpture grow, I wandered through the darkness among the metal gardens, searching for Lunora's voice. No one tends the sculptures now and most of them have gone to seed, but on an impulse I cut away a helix and carried it back to my villa, planting it in the quartz bed below the balcony. All night it sang to me, telling me of Lunora and the strange music she played to herself. . . .

IT must be just over three years ago that I first saw Lunora Goalen, in Georg Nevers' gallery on Beach Drive. Every summer at the height of the season at Vermilion



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Sands, Georg staged a special exhibition of sonic sculpture for the tourists. Shortly after we opened one morning I was sitting inside my large statue, *Zero Orbit*, plugging in the stereo amplifiers, when Georg suddenly gasped into the skin mike and a boom like a thunderclap nearly deafened me.

Head ringing like a gong, I climbed out of the sculpture, ready to crown Georg with a nearby maquette. Putting an elegant fingertip to his lips, he gave me that look which between artist and dealer signals one thing: *Rich client.*

The sculptures in the gallery entrance had begun to hum as someone came in, but the sunlight reflected off the bonnet of a white Rolls-Royce outside obscured the doorway.

Then I saw her, hovering over the stand of art journals, followed by her secretary, a tall purse-mouthed Frenchwoman almost as famous from the newsmagazines as her mistress.

Lunora Goalen, I thought, can *all* our dreams come true? She wore an ice-cool sliver of blue silk that shimmered as she moved towards the first statue, a toque hat of black violets and bulky dark glasses that hid her face and were a nightmare to cameramen. While she paused by the statue, one of Arch Penko's frenetic tangles that looked like a rimless bicycle wheel, listening to its arms vibrate and howl, Nevers and I involuntarily steadied ourselves against the wing-piece of my sculpture.

IN general it's probably true that the most maligned species on Earth is the wealthy patron of modern art. Laughed at by the public, exploited by dealers, even the artists regard them simply as meal tickets. Lunora Goalen's superb collection of sonic sculpture on the roof of her Venice palazzo, and the million dollars' worth of generous purchases spread around her apartments in Paris, London and New York, represented freedom and life to a score of sculptors, but few felt any gratitude toward Miss Goalen.

Nevers was hesitating, apparently suffering from a sudden intention tremor, so I nudged his elbow.

"Come on," I snarled softly. "This is the apocalypse. Let's go."

Nevers turned on me icily, noticing, apparently for the first time, my rust-stained slacks and three-day stubble.

"Milton!" he snapped. "For God's sake, vanish! Sneak out through the freight exit." He jerked his head at my sculpture. "And switch that insane thing off! How did I ever let it in here?"

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LUNORA'S secretary, Mme. Charcot, spotted us at the rear of the gallery. Georg shot out four inches of immaculate cuff and swayed forward, the smile on his face as wide as a bulldozer. I backed away behind my sculpture, with no intention of leaving and letting Nevers cut my price just for the cachet of making a sale to Lunora Goalen.

Georg was bowing all over the gallery, oblivious of Mme. Charcot's contemptuous sneer. He led Lunora over to one of the exhibits and fumbled with the control panel, selecting the alto lift which would resonate most flatteringly with her own body tones. Unfortunately the statue was Sigismund Lubitsch's *Big End*, a squat bull-necked drum like an enormous toad that at its sweetest emitted a rasping grunt. An old-style railroad tycoon might have elicited a sympathetic chord from it, but its response to Lunora was like a bull's to a butterfly.

They moved on to another sculpture, and Mme. Charcot gestured to the white-gloved chauffeur standing by the Rolls. He climbed in and moved the car down the street, taking with it the beach crowds beginning to gather outside the gallery. Able now to see Lunora clearly against the hard white walls, I stepped into *Orbit* and watched her closely through the helixes.

Of course I already knew everything about Lunora Goalen. A thousand magazine exposés had catalogued ad nauseam her strange flawed beauty, her fits of melancholy and compulsive roving around the world's capitals. Like Garbo's in the '40s and '50s, her exquisite haunted profile flitted elusively through the gossip columns and society pages, in unending flight from self-imposed exile. No one felt less sorry for her than me.

Her face was the clue. As she took off her sunglasses I could see the curious shadow that fell across it, numbing the smooth white skin. There was a dead glaze in her slate-blue eyes, an uneasy tension around the mouth. Altogether I had a vague impression of something unhealthy, of a Venus with a secret vice.

Nevers was switching on sculpture right and left like a lunatic magician, and the noise was a babel of competing sensocells, some of the statues responding to Lunora's enigmatic presence, others to Nevers and the secretary.

LUNORA shook her head slowly, mouth hardening as the noise irritated her. "Yes, Mr. Nevers," she said in her slightly husky voice, "it's all very clever, but a bit of a headache. I *live* with my sculpture, I want some-

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thing intimate and personal."

"Of course, Miss Goalen," Nevers agreed hurriedly, looking around desperately. As he knew only too well, sonic sculpture was now nearing the apogee of its abstract phase, 12-tone blips and zooms were all that most statues emitted. No purely representational sound, responding to Lunora, for example, with a Mozart rondo or (better) a Webern quartet, had been built for ten years. I guessed that her early purchases were wearing out and that she was hunting the cheaper galleries in tourist haunts like Vermilion Sands in the hope of finding something designed for middle-brow consumption.

Lunora looked up pensively at *Zero Orbit*, towering at the rear of the gallery next to Nevers' desk, apparently unaware that I was hiding inside it. Suddenly realizing that the possibility of selling the statue had miraculously arisen, I crouched down inside the trunk and started to breathe heavily, activating the senso-circuits.

Immediately the statue came to life. About 12 feet high, it was shaped like an enormous metal totem topped by two heraldic wings. The big body microphones in the wing-tips were powerful enough to pick up respiratory noises at a distance of twenty feet. There were four people well within focus, and the statue began to emit a series of low rhythmic pulses as beat frequencies piled up.

Seeing the statue respond to her, Lunora came forward with interest. Nevers backed away discreetly, taking Mme. Charcot with him, leaving Lunora and I together, separated by a thin metal skin and three feet of vibrating air. Fumbling for some way of widening the responses, I eased up the control slides that lifted the volume. Neurophonics has never been my strong suit—I regard myself, in an old-fashioned way, as a sculptor, not an electrician—and the statue was only equipped to play back a simple sequence of chord variations on the sonic profile in focus.

Knowing that Lunora would soon realize that the statue's repertory was too limited for her, I picked up the hand-mike used for testing the circuits and on the spur of the moment began to croon the refrain from *Creole Love Song*. Reinterpreted by the sonic cores, and then relayed through the loudspeakers, the lulling rise and fall was pleasantly soothing, the electronic overtones disguising my voice and amplifying the tremors of emotion as I screwed up my courage (the statue was priced at 500 dollars—even subtracting Nevers' 90% commission left me with enough for the bus fare home).

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STEPPING up to the statue, Lunora listened to it motionlessly, eyes wide with astonishment, apparently assuming that it was reflecting, like a mirror, its subjective impressions of herself. Rapidly running out of breath, my speeding pulse lifting the tempo, I repeated the refrain over and over again, varying the base lift to simulate a climax.

Suddenly I saw Nevers black patent shoes through the hatch. Pretending to slip his hand into the control panel, he rapped sharply on the statue and I switched off.

"Don't, please!" Lunora cried as the sounds fell away. She looked around uncertainly, Mme. Charcot stepping nearer with a curiously watchful expression, then pulled herself together.

Nevers hesitated. "Of course, Miss Goalen, it still requires tuning, you—"

"I'll take it," Lunora said. She quickly pushed on her sunglasses, then turned and hurried from the gallery, her face hidden.

Nevers watched her go. "What happened, for heaven's sake? Is Miss Goalen all right?"

Mme. Charcot took a checkbook out of her blue crocodile handbag. A sardonic smirk played over her lips, and through the helix I had a brief but penetrating glimpse into her relationship with Lunora Goalen. It was then, I think, that I realized Lunora might be something more than a bored dilettante.

Mme. Charcot glanced at her watch, a gold pea strung on her scrawny wrist. "You will have it delivered today. By 3 o'clock sharp. Now, please, the price?"

Smoothly, Nevers said: "10,000 dollars."

Choking, I pulled myself out of the statue, unable to control myself, spluttered helplessly at Nevers.

Mme. Charcot regarded me with astonishment, frowning at my filthy togs. Nevers trod savagely on my foot. "Naturally, Madamoiselle, our prices are modest, but as you can see, M. Milton is an inexperienced artist."

Mme. Charcot nodded sagely. "This is the sculptor? I am relieved. For a moment I feared that he lived in it."

WHEN she had gone Nevers closed the gallery for the day. He took off his jacket and pulled a bottle of absinthe from the desk. Sitting back in his silk waistcoat, he trembled slightly with nervous exhaustion.

"Tell me, Milton, how can you ever be sufficiently grateful to me?"

I patted him on the back. "Georg, you were brilliant! She's another Catherine the Great, you handled her like a diplomat. When you go to Paris you'll be

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a great success. Ten thousand dollars!" I did a quick jig around the statue. "That's the sort of redistribution of wealth I like to see. How about an advance on my cut?"

Nevers examined me moodily. He was already in the Rue de Rivoli, over-bidding for Leonardos with a languid flicker of a pomaded eyebrow. He glanced at the statue and shuddered. "An extraordinary woman. Completely without taste. Which reminds me, I see you rescored the memory drum. The aria from *Tosca* cued in beautifully. I didn't realize the statue contained that."

"It doesn't," I told him, sitting on the desk. "That was me. Not exactly Caruso, I admit, but then he wasn't much of a sculptor—"

"What?" Nevers leapt out of his chair. "Do you mean you were using the hand microphone? You *fool!*"

"What does it matter? She won't know." Nevers was groaning against the wall, drumming his forehead on his fist. "Relax, you'll hear nothing."

Promptly at 9-01 the next morning the telephone rang.

AS I drove the pick-up out to Lagoon West Nevers' warnings rang in my ears—". . . six international blacklists, sue me for misrepresentation . . ." He apologized effusively to Mme. Charcot, assured her that the monotonous booming the statue emitted was most certainly not its natural response. Obviously a circuit had been damaged in transit, the sculptor himself was driving out to correct it.

Taking the beach road around the lagoon, I looked across at the Goalen mansion, an abstract summer palace that reminded me of a Frank Lloyd Wright design for an experimental department store. Terraces jutted out at all angles, and here and there were huge metal sculptures, Brancusi's and Calder mobiles, revolving in the crisp desert light. Occasionally one of the sonic statues hooted mournfully like a distant hoodoo.

Mme. Charcot collected me in the vestibule, led me up a sweeping glass stairway. The walls were heavy with Dali and Picasso, but my statue had been given the place of honor at the far end of the south terrace. The size of a tennis court, without rails (or safety net), this jutted out over the lagoon against the skyline of Vermilion Sands, long low furniture grouped in a square at its center.

Dropping the tool-bag, I made a pretense of dismantling the control panel, played with the amplifier so that the statue let out a series of staccato blips. These put it into the same category as the rest of Lunora Goalen's sculpture. A dozen pieces

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stood about on the terrace, most of them early period sonic dating back to the '70s, when sculptors produced an incredible sequence of grunting, clanking, barking and twanging statues, and galleries and public squares all over the world echoed night and day with minatory booms and thuds.

"Any luck?"

I turned to see Lunora Goalen. Unheard, she had crossed the terrace, now stood with hands on hips, watching me with interest. In her black slacks and shirt, blonde hair around her shoulders, she looked more relaxed, but sunglasses still masked her face.

"Just a loose valve. Won't take me a couple of minutes." I gave her a big rugged smile and she stretched out on the chaise longue in front of the statue. Lurking by the french windows at the far end of the terrace was Mme. Charcot, eyeing us with a beady smirk. Irritated, I switched on the statue to full volume and coughed loudly into the hand-mike.

THE sound boomed across the open terrace like an artillery blank and the old crone backed away quickly.

Lunora smiled as the echoes rolled away over the desert, the statues on the lower terraces responding with muted pulses. "Years ago, when Father was away, I used to go up onto the roof and shout down at the top of my voice, set off the most wonderful echo trains. The whole place would boom for hours, drive the servants mad." She laughed pleasantly to herself at the recollection, as if it had been a long time ago.

"Try it now," I suggested. "Or is Mme. Charcot mad already?"

Lunora put a green-tipped finger to her lips. "Careful, you'll get me into trouble. Anyway, Mme. Charcot is not my servant."

"No? What is she then, your jailer?" We spoke mockingly, but I put a curve on the question; something about the Frenchwoman had made me suspect that she might have more than a small part in maintaining Lunora's illusions about herself. Reclining like a puma on the couch, she looked a lot less haunted than the gossip magazines had led me to believe the previous day. Was this a case of nature imitating art, had Lunora become convinced that her beauty *was* marred in some way? As far as I could judge now her features were smooth and flawless, her face a white oval, the lips a full hot pink.

I waited for her to reply, but she ignored me and began to stare out across the lagoon. Within a few seconds her personality had changed levels, once

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again she was the remote autocratic princess.

Unobserved, I slipped my hand into the tool-bag, drew out a tape spool. Clipping it into the player deck, I switched on the table. The statue vibrated slightly, and a low melodious chant murmured out into the still air.

Standing behind the statue, I watched Lunora respond to the music. The sounds mounted, steadily swelling as Lunora moved into the statue's focus. Gradually its rhythms quickened, its mood urgent and plaintive, unmistakably a lover's passion-song. A musicologist would have quickly identified the sounds as a transcription of the balcony duet from *Romeo and Juliet*, but to Lunora its only source was the statue. I had recorded the tape that morning, realizing it was the only method of saving the statue. Nevers' confusion of *Tosca* and *Creole Love Song* reminded me that I had the whole of classical opera in reserve. For ten thousand dollars I would gladly call once a day and feed in every aria from *Figaro* to *Moses and Aaron*.

Abruptly, the music fell away. Lunora had backed out of the statue's focus, was standing twenty feet from me. Behind her, in the doorway, was Mme. Charcot.

Lunora smiled briefly. "It seems to be in perfect order," she said. Without doubt she was gesturing me towards the door.

I hesitated, suddenly wondering whether to tell her the truth, my eyes searching her beautiful secret face.

Then Mme. Charcot came between us, smiling like a skull.

DID Lunora Goalen really believe that the sculpture was singing to her? For a fortnight, until the tape expired, it didn't matter. By then Nevers would have cashed the check and he and I would be on our way to Paris.

Within two or three days, though, I realized that I wanted to see Lunora again. Rationalizing, I told myself that the statue needed to be checked, that Lunora might discover the fraud. Twice during the next week I drove out to the summer house on the pretext of tuning the sculpture, but Mme. Charcot held me off. Once I telephoned, but again she intercepted me. When I saw Lunora she was driving at speed through Vermilion Sands in the Rolls-Royce, a dim glimmer of gold and jade in the deep back seat.

Finally I searched through my record albums, selected Toscanini conducting *Tristan and Isolde*, in the scene where Tristan mourns his parted lover, then carefully transcribed another tape.

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That night I drove down to Lagoon West, parked my car by the beach on the south shore and walked out onto the surface of the lake. In the moonlight the summer house half a mile away looked like an abstract movie set, a single light on the upper terrace illuminating the outlines of my statue. Stepping carefully across the fused silica, I made my way slowly towards it, fragments of the statue's song drifting by on the low breeze. Two hundred yards from the house I lay down on the warm sand, watching the lights of Vermilion Sands fade one by one like the melting jewels of a necklace.

Above, the statue sang into the blue night, its song never wavering. Lunora must have been sitting only a few feet above it, the music enveloping her like an overflowing fountain. Shortly after two o'clock it dies down and I saw her suddenly at the rail, the white ermine wrap around her sun-burnt shoulders stirring in the wind as she stared out at the brilliant moon.

Half an hour later I climbed the lake wall and walked along it to the spiral fire escape. The bougainvilla wreathed through the railings muffled the sounds of my feet on the metal steps, and I reached the upper terrace unnoticed. Far below, in her quarters on the north side, Mme. Charcot was asleep.

Swinging up onto the terrace, I moved quickly among the dark statues, drawing low murmurs from them as I passed.

I crouched down inside *Zero Orbit*, unlocked the control panel and inserted the fresh tape, slightly raising the volume.

As I left I could see down onto the west terrace twenty feet below, where Lunora lay asleep under the stars on an enormous velvet bed, like a lunar princess on a purple catafalque. Her face shone in the starlight, her loose hair veiling her naked breasts. Behind her a statue stood guard, intoning softly to itself as it pulsed to the sounds of her breathing.

THREE times I visited Lunora's house after midnight, taking with me another spool of tape, another love-song from my library. On the last visit I watched her sleeping until dawn rose across the desert, then fled down the stairway and across the sand, hiding among the cold pools of shadow whenever a car moved along the beach road.

All day I waited by the telephone in my villa, hoping she would call me. In the evening I walked out to the sand reefs, climbed one of the spires and watched Lunora on the terrace after dinner. She lay on a couch before the statue, and until long after midnight it played to her,

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endlessly singing. Its voice was now so strong that cars would slow down several hundred yards away, the drivers searching for the source of the melodies crossing the vivid evening air.

At last I recorded the final tape, for the first time in my own voice. Briefly I described the whole sequence of imposture, then quietly asked Lunora if she would sit for me and let me design a new sculpture to replace the fraud she had bought.

I clenched the tape tightly in my hand while I walked across the lake, looking up at the rectangular outline of the terrace.

As I reached up to the wall, a black-suited figure suddenly put his head over the ledge and looked down at me. It was Lunora's chauffeur.

Startled, I moved away across the sand. In the moonlight the chauffeur's white face flickered bonily. Then he backed silently into the shadows.

THE next evening, as I knew it would, the telephone finally rang.

"Mr. Milton, the statue has broken down again." Mme. Charcot's voice sounded sharp and strained. "Miss Goalen is extremely upset. You must come and repair it. Immediately."

I waited an hour before leaving, playing through the tape I had recorded the previous evening. This time I would be present when Lunora heard it.

Mme. Charcot was standing by the wide glass doors. I parked in the blue gravel court by the Rolls, as I walked over to her, I noticed how eerie the house sounded. All over it the statues were muttering to themselves, emitting low snaps and clicks, like the disturbed occupants of a zoo settling down with difficulty after a storm. Even Mme. Charcot looked worn and tense.

At the terrace she paused. "One moment, Mr. Milton, I will see if Miss Goalen is ready to receive you." She walked quietly towards the chaise lounge pulled up against the statue at the end of the terrace. Lunora was stretched out awkwardly across it, her hair disarrayed. She sat up irritably as Mme. Charcot approached.

"Is he here? Alice, whose car was that? Hasn't he come?"

"He is just preparing his equipment," Mme. Charcot told her soothingly. "Miss Lunora, let me fix your hair—"

"Alice, don't fuss! God, what's keeping him?" She sprang up and paced over to the statue, glowering silently out of the darkness like an Assyrian deity. While Mme. Charcot walked away Lunora suddenly sank on her knees before the statue, pressed her right cheek to its cold surface.

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Uncontrollably she began to sob, deep spasms shaking her shoulders.

"Wait, Mr. Milton!" Mme. Charcot held tightly to my elbow. "She will not want to see you for a few minutes." She added: "You are a great sculptor, Mr. Milton. You have given that statue a remarkable voice. It tells her all she needs to know."

I broke away and ran through the darkness.

"Lunora!"

She looked around, the hair over her face matted with tears. She leaned limply against the dark trunk of the statue, and I knelt down and held her hands, then tried to lift her to her feet.

She wrenched away from me. "Fix it! Hurry, what are you waiting for? Make the statue sing again!"

I WAS certain that she no longer recognized me. I stepped back, the spool of tape in my hand. "What's the matter with her?" I whispered to Mme. Charcot. "The sounds don't really come from the statue, surely she realizes that?"

Mme. Charcot's head lifted. "What do you mean—not from the statue?"

I showed her the tape. "This isn't a true sonic sculpture. The music is played off these magnetic tapes."

A chuckle rasped briefly from Mme. Charcot's throat. "Well, put it in nonetheless, monsieur. She doesn't care where it comes from. She is interested in the statue, not you."

I hesitated, watching Lunora, still hunched like a supplicant at the foot of the statue.

"You mean—?" I started to say incredulously. "Do you mean she's in love with the *statue?*"

Mme. Charcot's hooded reptilian eyes summed up all my naiveté.

"Not with the statue," she said darkly. "With *herself*."

For a moment I stood there among the murmurring sculpture, then dropped the spool on the floor and turned away.

THEY left Lagoon West the next day.

For a week I remained at my villa, then drove along the beach road towards the summer house one evening after Nevers told me that they had gone.

The house was closed, the statues standing motionless in the darkness. My footsteps echoed away among the balconies and terraces, and the house reared up into the sky like a tomb. All the sculpture had been switched off, and I realized how dead and monumental non-sonic sculpture must have seemed.

Zero Orbit had also gone. I assumed that Lunora had taken it

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with her, so immersed in her self-love that she preferred a clouded mirror which had once told her of her beauty to no mirror at all, and that as she sat on some penthouse veranda in Venice or Paris with the great statue towering into the dark sky like an extinct symbol she would hear again the lays it has sung. Perhaps sometimes she would play over the last tape I had left her.

Six months later Nevers commissioned another statue from me, and I went out one dusk to the sand reefs where the sonic sculpture grow. As I approached, they were creaking in the wind whenever the thermal gradients cut through them. I walked up the long slopes, listening to them mewl and whine, searching for one that would serve as the sonic core for a new statue.

Somewhere ahead in the darkness, I heard a familiar phrase, a garbled fragment of a human voice. Startled, I ran on, feeling between the dark barbs and helixes.

Then, lying in a hollow below the ridge, I found the source. Half-buried under the sand like the skeleton of a colossus, were twenty or thirty pieces of metal, the dismembered trunk and wings of my statue. Many of the pieces had taken root again and were emitting a thin haunted sound, disconnected fragments of the testament to Lunora Goalen I had dropped on her terrace.

As I walked away down the slope, the white sand pouring into my footprints like a succession of occluding hour glasses, the sounds of my voice whined faintly through the metal gardens like a forgotten lover whispering over a dead harp.

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the DRAGON *of* ISKANDER

By NAT SCHACHNER

Introduction by
Sam Moskowitz

Illustrator SUMMERS

FREQUENTLY a writer will play a key role in the revitalization of a literary movement without claiming or receiving any credit for his achievement. Nat Schachner was such an author. A member of the bar, he teamed up with Arthur Leo Zaget to enter the science fiction field with the story Back to 20,000 A. D. *in the March, 1931 issue of* WONDER STORIES. *This story, built around a future in which mankind was regimented in a super-nazi manner, was frighteningly prophetic and well-received by the readership.*

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When science-fiction in magazine form faced extinction in 1933, Nat Schachner was recruited by F. Orlin Tremaine, new trouble-shooting editor of ASTOUNDING STORIES *to shoot stimulating concepts into its expiring design. He wrote what was termed the first "thought-variant" story in* Ancestral Voices, *then followed with scores of short novels, novelets and short stories characterized by themes of such originality that they paced a gifted group of writers that carried that magazine to field leadership within a year.*

During the period when his stories Redmask of the Outlands, He From Procyon, The 100th Generation, The Living Equation, The Great Thirst, The Ultimate Metal, Mind of the World, I Am Not God *and* The Isotope Men *appeared—1934 and 1935—readers were inclined to attach the word "hack" to anyone who was prolific. In retrospect we realize that Schachner was not only a font of new ideas but a capable literary stylist as well. A series of successful historical novels early established this point in case anyone challenged it, but the best was yet to come.*

In the 'Forties Nat Schachner scored with a series of masterful biographies on early great Americans that catapulted him into the front rank of historians. His evaluations of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson have been termed by critics as "definitive" works on those men.

Among science fiction writers he was a doer as well as a dreamer, serving as the first secretary of The American Interplanetary Society, organized in 1930 for the scientific promotion of rocketry and other phases of space-travel. His report on research concerning Equipment for an Interplanetary Expedition and Methods of Steering *appeared in the March-April, 1931* BULLETIN OF THE AMERICAN INTERPLANETARY SOCIETY.

As a prophet his reputation stands firm on his story World Gone Mad *in the October, 1935 issue of* AMAZING *where he pictures two nations, each possessing Intercontinental ballistic missiles with atomic warheads, trying to find ways of gaining a military advantage in their stalemated situation.*

One of his most unusual and off-trail science fiction stories, The Dragon of Iskander, *appeared in the April, 1934 issue of* TOP-NOTCH, *which in 1934 was also edited by F. Orlin Tremaine. The notion of a lost civilization in a remote portion of the earth is not new, but Nat Schachner in this engaging novelet adds not one, but three fascinating twists to freshen up an always intriguing science fiction situation.*

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THE DRAGON OF ISKANDER

I.

IT was long past midnight. The expedition lay encamped in a gigantic hollow of moving sand. A blood-red moon drooped over the mountains. The Kazak guards drowsed.

Ambar Khan grunted, muttered fearfully to himself. He did not like the Gobi. It was a place bewitched. He paced steadily back and forth, his rifle thudding softly before him.

To the west stretched the fabulous T'ien Shan, the Heavenly Mountains, the Snow Mountains, the Ten-Thousand *li* East-by-South Mountains, grim ramparts of Chinese Turkestan. The expiring moon impaled itself on a splintered peak. Something moved across its face swiftly.

Ambar Khan groaned, called on Allah, and stared again. The moon plunged into darkness, but the thing glowed by its own light. Down from the mountains it swooped, breathing fire and flame. Soft, roaring sounds sped before the monster. Ambar Khan caught a glimpse of lashing tail, gigantic claws, and elongated neck and shrieked. He knew now what it was. A rifle shot hushed the murmurings of the Gobi. The next instant Ambar Khan groveled in the sand, blinded with terror.

Owen Crawford sprang out of the deep sleep of exhaustion, every sense alert. The camp was in an uproar. Camels grunted and squealed and kicked at their hobblings, dogs yelped in short, excited barks; the Chinese camel drivers and pack porters wailed in unison.

"Bandits!" thought Crawford, and flung himself out of the tent, gun in hand.

Behind him padded his personal servant, Aaron, man of Tientsin, fat and over forty. His feet were bare, his breathing asthmatic, his walk a waddle, but his heart was valiant, and the gun in his pudgy fingers did not waver.

OUTSIDE, the blackness of the night was hideous with noise and movement. The singsong wail of the Chinese clamored high above the deeper gutturals of the Kazaks. Crawford raised his voice in a shout, to bring swift order, to organize against the invisible enemy.

A tall figure loomed to one side. "This is no attack," said Andros Theramenes, Greek by race, assistant archaeologist.

Another figure rose to the left.

"Nay, it is worse," Kang Chou, Chinese governor of Turkestan, agreed.

"Then what—" Crawford began, and gasped into silence. He, too, had seen it!

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The monster was dropping fast. A bullet would have lagged behind. Down it came upon the camp with a terrifying *swoosh*. Crawford staggered back and swore involuntarily; his gun hung loose from nerveless fingers. It was hideous, impossible, a myth out of the fabulous past!

Down, down it came, a thing of sinuous, scaly body, with a glittering metallic tail that lashed the air into little whirlwinds. The huge reptilian head glared balefully out of two, round, unwinking orbs; great claws, affixed to short, extended legs, were like steel hooks ready to rend and slash. Fire vomited forth from red-pitted nostrils, from yawning bloody mouth, from leathern wings and tail. The frightful din of its passage muted the clamor of the camp.

Then it struck.

The great claws curved around the canvas of the tent Crawford had just quitted, swept it under the hideous bosom, and the beast was up again, a meteoric monster of fire, homing for the Heavenly Mountains.

CRAWFORD shot once, but the bullet was futile. Already the winged anachronism was a rapidly diminishing swath in the blackness, hurtling over the gloom-shrouded peaks. In seconds it was gone, quenched, as though it had never been.

The camel drivers cried out together in one loud voice, "The Holy Dragon," and rose tremblingly to care for the plunging, snorting animals.

"Lights!" called Crawford.

An electric torch was thrust into his hand. He flicked it into an oval of white radiance. Aaron, his servant, showed ghastly white, muttering inaudible prayers to his ancestors; Theramenes, tall and reddish-haired like the northern Greeks, betrayed no change in his ordinarily reserved and calm demeanor. Only his eyes glittered strangely.

"It was your tent the Dragon struck at," he said slowly. "Had you not fortunately run out—" He stopped and shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

"There would have been a new leader to this expedition," Crawford said grimly. He flashed the torch suddenly full on the Chinese governor. "Kang Chou, what do you know about this?"

The habitual mask of centuries overlaid the Oriental features, in which there was no trace of fright. "You have heard the camel drivers," he remarked courteously. "It was the Holy Dragon, the guardian spirit of the T'ien Shan. Beyond the memory of our ancestors has it dwelt in the inaccessible mountains; so runs the childish patter of the people. It swoops from its nest on occasion; its prey always

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a vigorous, comely woman, a female child, a young camel, a sheep. The natives worship it."

Crawford stared. "Never by chance a man or man child?"

"Never."

The American archaeologist looked at the bland governor thoughtfully. It was passing strange; this untoward interest of the Chinese in his excavations; the unheralded visit of the governor to his camp; the weird visitation of the Dragon. What was the connection; what did the fiery monster portend? The blow, as Theramenes had pointed out, had manifestly been struck at him.

"Andros," he ordered, "keep an eye on the tents. I want to see what damage's been done."

His assistant said quietly: "I shall watch in the proper places." That meant he had understood. The Chinese governor and his retinue were to bear close supervision.

Crawford toured the encampment quickly, efficiently. Already lanterns were bobbing back and forth, throwing flickering yellow blobs of light on the confusion. The damage, aside from the complete loss of his tent, was not great. Two camels had broken their hobbles and were gone to the desert. A man had fallen flat over a peg and broken a leg. But Ambar Khan, who had first seen the Dragon and raised the alarm, was dead. His arms were outstretched, his face hidden in the sand. Crawford turned him over and swore fiercely. The man's throat was slit neatly from ear to ear. The blood was not yet congealed. He had been murdered.

OWEN CRAWFORD strode back and forth with quick, nervous strides in the narrow confines of Theramenes' tent. His lean, weathered jaw was outthrust, his gray eyes snapped with belligerent fires past a bold aquiline nose. He talked rapidly to the Greek archaeologist, while Aaron, placid once more, brewed fragrant tea over an alcohol lamp.

"The expedition must go on," Crawford declared. "Some one, something, is trying to stop us. Poor Ambar Khan paid the penalty for warning us in time."

Theramenes shrugged. "Why?' he asked in his perfect, yet slightly slurred, English. "You have permission from the Canton authorities for your excavations. We've already found a buried city on the edge of the desert, showing Hellenistic influences, but the Chinese never bother about relics alien to themselves."

Crawford spun around. "Exactly! That's what makes Kang Chou's interest the more strange. There's been a leak. He knows my real plans."

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There was a slight sneer to the Greek. "Still harping on that theme? Alexander never marched this far north. He never saw the Heavenly Mountains."

"So say the history books. But I've traced his passage step by step. Somewhere in the T'ien Shan I'll find the evidence." Crawford paused, looked a moment curiously at his assistant. "You are a Macedonian yourself, aren't you?"

Theramenes' laugh was a bit forced. "Why, yes. Why do you ask?"

"No particular reason," Crawford answered.

He had never quite warmed up to the Greek. All his plans had been for a solo exploration, but wires had been pulled at the last minute, and Theramenes was attached to the expedition. It had been merely a polite request, of course, but the request of the American Museum had all the force of a command. They footed the bills. Theramenes knew his work thoroughly, Crawford was compelled to admit. His intuitive flashes concerning the early Greek civilization in Central Asia were sometimes little short of marvelous. But Crawford felt something was held back; some queer, outlandish strain in the man not attributable alone to difference in race.

The Greek seemed anxious to change the subject. "What do you make of that Dragon?" he asked.

Crawford's face went sober. "I don't know," he admitted. "We saw it, all of us. It took my tent; that couldn't have been dreamed. A Dragon in the twentieth century! It sounds impossible."

"It isn't." There was a deadly seriousness in the Greek's voice that the American had never noted before. "There have been legends for centuries about that Dragon, about far more horrible things in the T'ien Shan. We've seen the one; let us credit the others. Let us turn back before it is too late. Once in the Heavenly Mountains, we shall never return."

"You are at liberty to resign from the expedition," Crawford said coldly. "I intend going on."

His assistant's eyes flashed dangerously. They were not the eyes of a coward. "Very well, then. I do not intend to resign. You are the leader, and I obey."

Crawford said: "We start in an hour."

II.

THE EVENING shadows were lengthening as the little party toiled over Dead Mongol Pass. The snow lay many feet deep on the treacherous road. On the other side was Chinese Turkestan, but Crawford was looking for a certain narrow gorge that

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led to the north, deeper into the Heavenly Mountains. No one had ever ventured far in that direction; Chinese and Kazaks both had frightful tales of what lay beyond. The Dragon had disappeared to the north.

The expedition was encamped at the foot of Dead Mongol Pass, waiting for their return. With Crawford on this last exploration were Theramenes and Aaron; then another, an unwelcomed, unbidden member, Kang Chous, governor of Turkestan, had blandly announced his intention of proceeding with them. Crawford fumed, and stormed, and gave in. The governor had powers; if he wished, he could tear up the Canton documents. He came alone; threats of death could not force his soldiers to accompany him into the dreaded mountains.

Up to the very top of the bleak, windswept pass they toiled, with two weeks' provisions on their backs, and rifles on their shoulders. There they found the little gorge they had been told of. It was but a rift in the rock, barely six feet wide, and angling to the north.

Crawford plunged in without hesitation. The path zigzagged, but always to the north, and always upward. Night found them still in its narrow confines, its walls a thousand feet high. Shivering with cold, they managed to make a fire of gnarled roots and rotted boughs that the storms had swept over the cliffs, and went to sleep. All night long the wind howled and bit with northern fury; and ghosts gibbered and shrieked.

In the morning they started again. Theramenes was even more silent than his wont, but his stride was tireless and his swing that of a born mountaineer. Aaron struggled and puffed, and the fat loosened on him great beads of sweat. Kang Chou walked easily, which was strange for a pampered Chinese lord, and the bland smile never left his face. All that day they went on and on, the gorge never widening, never narrowing, the high walls towering in shivering gloom.

Then, as the slanting rays across the narrow sky above proved evening almost at hand, the gorge suddenly tightened. Five feet, four, three, barely room for a rotund body like Aaron's to squeeze through; then closure and jagged granite to interminable heights. Pitchy blackness slowly enfolded them; a mocking star beamed faintly in the inverted depths above.

Theramenes broke the stunned silence. They could not see his face, but to Crawford's supersensitive ears there was faint mockery, triumph, in the slurred accents.

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"We have reached the end of a mad venture. The gorge has no outlet. Let us turn back."

"Yes, master, now, at once!" cried Aaron. "The demons will be coming out soon."

KANG Chou's voice floated suavely. Was there regret in it? "I had thought—I was mistaken. It must be another road. We must start again—from Dead Mongol Pass."

Crawford bit his lips at the collapse of his plans, looked up at the black, forbidding mass. Had the dying Kazak lied, or wandered in delirium?

"We will camp here," he assented dully, "and go back in the morning."

"We would but waste time," said Kang Chou. "The road is safe, and it is early. We can travel several *li* before making camp."

"No," said Crawford positively. "We stop here."

He tripped the trigger of the flash. As the white light sprang forth, something thrust at him violently. The torch clattered stonily to the ground, and a hard, unyielding substance smashed against the side of his head.

Crawford dropped, stunned from the blow. There was a dull roaring in his ears, and dim echoes of shuffling feet and startled cries. His hand flung out to protect himself, and came in contact with the smooth, round cylinder of the flash. His fingers closed convulsively, seeking the trigger.

The confusion increased, the cries redoubled. Some one caught at his hand, tried to bend it back. Just at that moment the trigger clicked, and the opposite rock glowed into being. The invisible hand abruptly let go.

Aaron caught at the flash, turned it anxiously on his master.

"You all right? A rock he almost kill you."

Crawford's gaze slid past the frightened fatness of his servant, saw both Kang and Theramenes bending over him with equal anxiety on their countenances.

"A close shave!" said the Greek. "Lucky it was a glancing blow. The side of your head is bruised. A bit higher, and the rock would have hit square."

Kang Chou said: "Praise to your ancestors! A dislodged stone is a terrible thing in the mountains."

Crawford rose unsteadily to his feet. He was a bit dizzy. He felt his head. There was a lump on his right temple; it was sore to the touch, but there was no blood.

"I'm all right," he said. It was no rock that had grappled with him for the torch. What was behind all this? Who was ready to

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commit murder to prevent him from continuing his search? Kang Chou? Theramenes? Aaron? Some one else, who had preceded him, hidden in the clefts in waiting?

He took the flash from his servant, swung its wide beam carefully over the ground. There was dead silence behind him. Nothing showed, only the rubble-strewn floor of the gorge, the gigantic walls hemming him in on three sides. Not a break in the rough, hewn surfaces, not a recess in which an assailant could hide.

THE silence tensed. Some instinct made Crawford swing the light upward. The white radiance traveled up the blockading cliff, jerked to a sudden halt. The American sucked in his breath sharply. Some ten feet up the smooth surface, a black hole yawned.

"Stand against the rock, you fat crow," he said to Aaron.

The servant's face was tragic, but he obeyed. The American vaulted lightly to his shoulders, swayed a moment, and caught at the lip of the recess. Theramenes held the light steady.

Crawford pulled himself up and disappeared. They waited anxiously below. In some seconds his head and shoulders appeared.

"It's a cave, all right!" he shouted down. "How far back it goes, I don't know. The torch will show that. Come on, you fellows; I'll give you a hand."

Crawford played the flash around. They were in a cavern; the ceiling some dozen feet up, the width not over twenty, but the long stream of the light did not show any termination to the corridor.

"We will explore it at dawn," said Theramenes. His voice was excited; his usual calm was gone.

"We'll explore now," Crawford told him. "Daylight won't make any difference in here."

"But—"

"Come on," said his chief.

And the four of them moved cautiously forward, rifles ready for instant action. The subterranean corridor wound on interminably, the questing beam disclosing only dripping, icy walls.

Then suddenly it opened up—a vast, vaulted chamber in which the puny gleam lost itself in the immensities. Crawford called a halt. Which way now?

Theramenes pointed to the left, Kang Chou was equally positive the road was to the right, so Crawford forged straight ahead. There was no talk; each had an uneasy feeling of presences in the great chamber, of mocking figures watching their slow progress. The thin light but accentuated the threatening darkness.

Aaron clutched at his master, uttering a little strangled cry.

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"Look, look ahead! The big devil himself!"

THE party came to a quick halt. There, before them, was the end of the vast cavern—a perpendicular straight wall of rock. But the steady beam disclosed legs, gigantic Cyclopean legs, straddled at a wide angle, braced against the granite. Up went the light, and a huge torso sprang into view, massive, powerfully muscular. Up and up, until at the extreme limits of illumination, a face stared down at the startled explorers; calm, majestic in its majesty, a giant of ancient times, amused at the puny mortals who had dared penetrate his secrets.

Crawford's eager laugh broke the spell. "A statue!" he cried out, half in relief, half in excitement. Awe crept into his voice as he examined the great figure. "Theramenes, do you recognize it?"

The Greek shook his head. He was beyond words.

"Man, it's a replica of the Colossus of Rhodes. Exact in every detail, as the dimensions have come down to us. Now do you believe my theory? Alexander and his troops were in this cavern, sculptured that form."

Theramenes examined the Colossus. "You are right," he said at last. "It is authentic. Greeks only could have done that."

"There is an opening between the legs," remarked Kang Chou, unimpressed by the looming giant. He had other matters in mind.

It was narrow; barely room for a man of Aaron's girth, and the stars shone dimly in the depths.

Some urge made Aaron dart forward. He thrust his head and shoulders through, drank in the cool night air. A whistle resounded in the cavern, a peculiar shrill piping that sent echoes reverberating.

"What is that?" Crawford asked, startled.

There was no answer. The next instant Aaron screamed; there was a muted roaring, and his body was jerked violently through the opening.

CRAWFORD rushed forward, too late. A quick lunge just missed the last disappearing foot, and he caught at the jutting side only in time to save himself from plunging into tremendous depths. Far away, blazing a cometary path through the black night, was the Holy Dragon. Long streamers of fire trailed rearward. Then it was swallowed up, gone. Of Aaron there was no trace.

"What happened?" Kang Chou's soft unemotional voice sounded unpleasantly in the American's ears.

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Crawford did not answer. Instead his gaze shifted downward. His body stiffened, an ejaculation of surprise tore itself out of his throat. The two men crowded eagerly over his shoulder, but there was nothing to see. A white mist swirled and billowed in great leaps, filling the great depression in the twinkling of an eye—a sea of smoke that disclosed nothing.

Gone was Kang Chou's Chinese impassivity. He literally clawed at Crawford's shoulder. "What was it you saw?" he screamed. "Tell me—tell me what—"

Theramenes glowered in silence. His brow was black in the electric flash, his lips compressed.

Crawford turned. His face was like granite, grimly hard. He shook off the grasping hand. "I? I saw nothing, Kang Chou."

"You lie, foreign devil!" screeched the Chinese governor, dancing in rage. "You saw, and you think to keep the secret. Tell me, or—"

An automatic appeared in the yellow hand, slipped out of the ample sleeve. Theramenes moved with silent speed. A wrist of steel grasped the well-fleshed hand, wrenched. A howl of pain, and the gun made a clangor on the stony floor.

Crawford said, "Thanks!" and did not move. He had disdained to duck, or switch off the steady flash in his hand.

Kang Chou glared at the two archaeologists, holding his arm. Then the mask slipped back into place. He bowed low.

"I was hasty," he said suavely. "You have seen—nothing."

It was Theramenes who asked: "What happened to Aaron? Did he fall?"

Crawford grimaced with pain. The fat, asthmatic servant had been dear to him. "The Holy Dragon took him."

The Greek made a gesture of commiseration. "What now?"

"We wait until morning, and then start—"

Sleep was fitful in the black, damp cave. Watches were divided, but there was little slumber. Once Crawford thought he heard stealthy movement, but quick illumination of the torch showed nothing except Theramenes leaning on his rifle on guard, and Kang, a little to one side, snoring uneasily. After that, there was no further noise.

AT the first hint of dawn, the trio crowded between the great sculptured legs. They looked out on a long, deep valley, hemmed in on all four sides by towering, precipitous mountains, tumbling range on range as far as the eye could see. The Heavenly Mountains, the Ten-Thousand *li* East-by-South Mountains, had

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guarded their secret well. And downward—it was the Greek who grunted. For the heavy clouds lay like a waveless ocean. The bottom of the valley was invisible.

Crawford wrinkled his brows. There was black bitterness in his heart. Aaron was dead, and must be avenged.

"We are going down," he said.

"How?" asked the governor. His eagerness was carefully restrained. No mention was made of his outburst of the night before.

"There is a ledge," Crawford explained. "It slants down into the mist. Room enough for one man at a time, if we are careful."

"Shall we wait for the mist to clear?" asked Theramenes.

"No. I know these valley clouds. They last for days at a time."

Without further ado they prepared for the perilous descent. Packs were tightened, rifles lashed to keep both hands free. A mouthful of tinned food, a swig of warmish water from canteens, and they were ready to begin.

Crawford led the way, lowering himself carefully from the orifice. It was less than five feet to the ledge. On one side was a perpendicular wall, lost in the immensities above; on the other a sheer precipice, lost in the immensities below. The slant of the path was steep, but negotiable.

The American spoke in low tones to his assistant. He did not want Kang to hear.

"This path is artificial. See how smooth it is, how the stone is hewn."

"I've already noticed it," the Greek answered quietly.

SLOWLY, cautiously, they edged their way downward. Two thousand feet, and the white mist enveloped them. They were ghosts flitting noiselessly on insubstantial air. Even their voices sounded hollow. On and on—for hours it seemed—edging their way along, grasping the solid wall for safety, avoiding the unseen outer edge. A world of smoke, of writhing forms, of lost souls. No sign of an ending, no sign of a break in the clammy clouds. Down, and down, until to the bewildered explorers it seemed as if earth's center itself should have been reached.

Momentarily the mist parted, and closed as swiftly. Crawford swerved, but not fast enough. The cry of warning smothered in his throat. A clinging heavy cloth enveloped his head, sinewy arms held him immovable. He tried to struggle, but a cloying exudence from the bag stole into his brain, drowsed him into numbing calm. Behind him he heard a choked-off yell and then white silence.

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III.

CRAWFORD awoke with a dark, furry taste in his mouth and a drugged throbbing in his head. For a moment he had difficulty in focusing his thoughts—then he remembered. The second vision he had had at the bottom of the valley, the swift noiseless attack. He opened his eyes. He was in a huge chamber, hewn with infinite pains out of solid rock. Damp dripped slimily from incrusted walls, and a dim light filtered through from a tiny opening high on one side.

A dungeon, thought Crawford, and tried to rise. Something retarded his movements, made metallic sounds. He looked down. There were chains encircling his legs, holding him hobbled. He examined them with interest. The metal was bronze, exquisitely worked, and chased in a running design that caused Crawford to forget his predicament in an involuntary whistle of astonishment.

As if his low-pursed whistle were a signal, a door opened silently at the farther end of the dungeon, and a girl entered. The archaeologist forgot his chains in the greater astonishment. She was dressed in pure white; a single garment caught at the waist with a bronze pin and falling in graceful folds around small, sandaled feet.

In her hands she held a tray of bronze, with heaped food and a goblet of dark-red wine. But it was her face that held Crawford's attention. Those classic features, that straight, chiseled nose, the harmonious brow with the thick plaits of warm brown hair low on the forehead, the firm, full lips—how strangely familiar! Where had he seen this girl, or some one like her, before?

Then she smiled as she moved noiselessly forward, and the red lips parted slightly. That was it—he remembered now. A small, Greek figurine of white marble, representing Artemis the Huntress, that he had discovered near Antioch on a former expedition.

The girl placed the tray in front of him, straightened, beckoned to him to eat, and was gliding away. Crawford came out of his semi-stupor to call quickly:

"Wait a minute! I want to talk to you."

She turned at the sound of his voice. She shook her head with a puzzled air and said nothing.

He tried again; this time in Chinese. It worked no better. Mongol, Kazak—to no effect. The girl was frowning now and moved away again.

In desperation, afraid almost of its effect, knowing it to be impossible, Crawford spoke rapidly—in Greek. The girl paused ir-

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resolutely, turned half a classic profile in his direction. Her brow was furrowed with perplexity. It was obvious that the sounds awoke some echo in her, and it was also obvious that they were unintelligible.

CRAWFORD fell back exhausted. He was almost glad she had not understood. It would have been too bizarre, too fantastic for a hard-working, practical archaeologist of the sober twentieth century.

She was going now, the door was open; when the blinding answer burst like a time bomb in his mind. He shouted to catch her swift attention, in unaccustomed syllables that resounded like the surge of the open ocean.

"Mistress, do not go. You must tell me where I am and who you are."

This time it was not modern Greek, the clipped, degraded speech of a fallen race, but the pure, ancient tongue, briny with Attic salt, the speech of Homer and Sophocles, of Sappho and Pindar.

The effect was startling. The girl whirled around, her eyes wide open, a little liquid cry in her throat. Her rounded bosom rose and fell with the vehemence of her feelings. She started to speak, and checked herself forcibly.

Crawford felt he was dreaming, that the effects of the drug had not yet worn off. The attempt at Greek had been sheer insanity, an intuitive, unreasoning flash. What was a girl, dressed in the ancient Greek costume, and responding to the sound of the pure Greek tongue, doing in the T'ien Shan ramparts between Turkestan and the Black Gobi? What connection did she have with the Holy Dragon? Questions that clamored for immediate answer.

"You understand me?" he queried haltingly. Hardly ever had he used the Attic Greek for speech.

She nodded, gazing at him with a queer compound of fear and curiosity.

"Why, then, do you not answer?"

She shook her head in a decided negative.

"You are not permitted?"

To that she smiled again.

Crawford considered. "Your name at least," he implored.

The smile widened to a little tinkling laugh. "Aspasia!" she cried in a ripple of sound, and fled.

The door closed silently behind her, and the archaeologist was alone with his chains and his food.

The meat was roast mutton, prepared with spices; the bread of a curious oaten compound; there was a handful of figs, and

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the wine was sweet and heady.

When he had eaten and drunk his fill, he threw himself back against the straw-covered, stone pallet to which he was chained. He must think this thing out. From the first appearance of the Holy Dragon, the glimpse of the white temple withheld from his companions, to the appearance of Aspasia, each adventure seemed more astounding, more incredible than the preceding on. His companions! Poor Aaron was dead, a victim to the terrible Dragon; Theramenes and Kang Chou—what had happened to them? Dead, perhaps, even as he would be soon. Crawford had no illusions about his fate; whoever it was who inhabited this incredible valley would never let him return alive to inform the outside world of what he had seen.

He examined his bonds. They were strongly linked, and so skillfully wound it was impossible to wriggle out. A curiously intricate lock held them fast to a bronze ring imbedded in the rock. Escape just now was out of the question.

HOURS passed. He must have slept, for the tramp of metal-shod feet thudded down upon him unawares. Two men stood over him, tall, large-limbed men, sheathed in bronze armor, helmeted, with spears taller than themselves resting with the butt ends on the ground. The fairer-haired of the two bent over and placed a key in the lock of the American's chains. A grinding noise, and the bands fell away.

The darker warrior upended his spear, pricked Crawford roughly with the point. The archaeologist staggered to his feet, irritation at the brutal treatment lost in the amazement of seeing two exact replicas of ancient *hoplites* in the flesh.

The fair man made pantomime for him to go forward; the dark and crueller one urged him on with prods of the spear. Through the open door they marched into a long corridor, rockhewn, and illuminated with a yellowish glow from no visible source. The metal sandals of the guards clattered as they walked. On either side, Crawford could see solid, timbered doors, leading to other chambers, no doubt. But the guards urged him on.

At the end of the corridor was a door. The fair one opened it. They stepped out into sunshine and warmth; from the position of the sun over the mile-high mountain walls, it was not much past noon.

The archaeologist cast eager glances to right and left as he was pushed stumbling along. There was no mist in the valley now. At the farther end stood the temple he had first glimpsed

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from the mouth of the cave before the swirling mist hid it from view. It was a noble structure, in the Doric manner. White gleaming columns, unornamented, evenly spaced to uphold a flat marble roof. But there was more, far more.

The valley was approximately five miles long and three miles wide. A stream meandered down the middle, terminating in a lake at the opposite end from the temple. In between were fertile fields with waving corn, cattle peacefully grazing, and sheep. Hundreds of people were at work in the fields; men, women, and children. They straightened up to stare curiously as Crawford was marched past.

All were dressed in the flowing graceful Greek garments; their features ranged from purest classic Greek to a mongrel mixture with slanted eyes and high yellowish cheek bones. Here and there stood a woman, of unmixed Mongol blood, still with the terror of her capture in her fathomless eyes.

The archaeologist walked as in a dream; it was too much to digest at once. Their destination was obviously the temple. As they clanged over the marble approach, he managed to cast a hasty glance backward.

Two things caught his eye before the dark guard turned him roughly forward. One was the abode of his imprisonment. Purely Buddhist this. A rock settlement hewn out of living rock in terraces on the almost-perpendicular flank of the mountain. A *ming-öi* or House of a Thousand Rooms. The other was a strange-looking monster floating quietly on the waters of the far-distant lake.

Then he found himself walking through a forest of columns, past a great, sculptured figure, bearded, majestic, that Crawford immediately recognized as Jupiter Ammon, and out into an open court, before a throne.

The guards raised their spears high. As one they cried in ringing Greek:

"Hail, Alexander! Hail, Ammon's son!"

CRAWFORD stood stock-still. A man sat on the throne, a man out of the past. Alexander the Great himself, grown old, if the medaled representations did not lie. The same commanding brow, the same stern expression and chiseled nose, the flowing locks, snow-white by now, peeping out of a plume-surmounted helmet; burnished armor on the still brawny chest, a gem-tipped spear grasped in the right hand. On either side were ranged soldiers, in full panoply of war. Macedonians, the front rank kneeling, spears extended, the second rank standing, longer

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spears bristling through. The ancient Macedonian phalanx!

The great temple rang with an antiphonic response: "Hail, Alexander! Hail, Ammon's son!"

The figure on the throne spoke. His voice was harsh, commanding:

"Know, stranger, I am Alexander, he who conquered Tyre and Sidon, Darius and Porus. The world was at my feet, and shall be so again. Prostrate yourself, stranger, for I am divine."

Silence crept through the marble columns, yet Crawford remained erect.

Slowly he spoke, shattering the quiet, fumbling for the Greek:

"I know now what took place. Alexander led his troops to Samarkand. Thence he turned south, but a phalanx, raiders or deserters, wandered northward and were lost. Hostile tribes hemmed them in. Day and night they fought, until they found refuge in this valley. With them were captive native women; thus they lived and flourished through the ages, cut off from all mankind. You," he pointed to the seated warrior, "are not Alexander. He died in Babylon. You are the son of an obscure captain of a phalanx."

For a moment there was a stunned lull. Not in two thousand years had Alexander been thus defied.

A voice carried unexpectedly from behind the throne. The voice was English, the tones amused, mocking: "You are right as usual, Owen Crawford. The man is an impostor, but his power is great. The doctrine is Pythagorean; one Alexander dies, his soul inhabits another."

Andros Theramenes, Greek archaeologist, assistant to the expedition of the American Museum, stepped out into full view.

The storm had already burst —a low growl from a hundred throats that sprang into a roar of beating sound, mingled with the clash of arms.

"Death! Death to the sacrilegious animal!"

The two guards held their spears pointed at the American's breast. Alexander had half risen from his seat, the corded veins knotting on his temples. The gem-tipped spear rose slowly. At the peak of the arc, the spears of the guards would lunge.

Crawford held himself balanced, ready to move with lightning speed. His plan of action was mapped. At the first drawing back of the spear held by the dark guard, he would lunge to one side, twist in a demi-volt, wrest it out of his hands, and be through the entrance of the temple in a flash. After that—

It was not to prove necessary, however. Theramenes leaned familiarly over to the outraged Alexander, said something in his

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ear. The old Macedonian sank back in his throne, lowered the fateful spear.

"Let the stranger wait," he said. "We shall decide his destiny later. Ho! Bring in the man with the yellow face."

Crawford relaxed, exhaling with some effort. Death had stared him in the face, and passed him by—for the present. There was drama here, drama that required careful reading.

IV.

A LITTLE ripple of movement took place at the rear of the throne, that widened as Kang Chou was thrust forward, under guard. His silken jacket was torn, but his impassive smile was bland as ever. He stood before Alexander, betraying no astonishment at the strangeness of the scene. Nor did he betray by a flicker his recognition of Theramenes.

"Speak, yellow face! It is the divine Alexander who commands you to speak. For what reason did you dare penetrate our fastnesses? Fear you not the Holy Dragon?"

The Chinese governor moved not a muscle. He had not understood. Theramenes, himself with the slant eyes of an impure blood, hastened to translate.

Kang Chou heard him out and answered in his own tongue. Once more Theramenes translated.

"I had heard rumors of your august, all-powerful presence in the T'ien Shan," said the governor. "Your Holy Dragon is as a god to our folk in the outer land. I come to pay honor and tribute to the divine Iskander, and to offer an alliance. I am Kang Chou, governor and war lord of Turkestan. I, too, have many soldiers and fear not the government of Canton." His glittering eyes roved over the sturdy Macedonian warriors. "Together we can go far."

Alexander thrust back his head and laughed, a full-throated laugh.

"Ha! That is good! This yellow man from the outside proposes alliance to me, Alexander, son of Jupiter Ammon, conqueror of the world!" His eye flashed with fanatic fires. "Know, yellow face, Alexander spurns all alliances; once more the world will tremble at the rush of his armies. The Macedonian phalanx is ready; ready to conquer as of old."

To Crawford, almost forgotten in the new turn of events, it seemed as if a flicker of annoyance passed rapidly over Theramenes' countenance as he turned to translate.

Kang Chou listened attentively. This time his speech was vigorous, direct, without the

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customary Oriental circumlocutions.

"Tell the old fool," he said, "together we can conquer, if not the world, at least all China. It is the Holy Dragon that I need. My plans are made. Without me he is helpless. Tell him if I do not return to Turfan, my generals have instructions. Five planes will bomb this valley out of existence."

There was no perceptible pause as Theramenes turned and began his translation. Crawford strained his ears suddenly; was he hearing aright? For he had overheard the Chinese, and this was the Greek. Theramenes was saying smoothly:

"The yellow man professes himself overwhelmed at your magnificence. He wishes to apologize for his presumption and begs only that a humble place be made for him in your retinue so he may serve divinity itself."

"That is better!" Alexander nodded with a self-satisfied air. "Perhaps we shall permit his worship. Take him out and see that he is guarded well."

The pseudo-archaeologist turned rapidly to Kang.

"Obey in all respects," he said in Chinese. "Myself shall come to talk with you later."

HIS face a mask, as though he had not heard, the governor was led out of the temple.

Theramenes swung around to Crawford. His eyes mocked the American, his voice hinted at a sneer. "This, divine Alexander, is the stranger I warned you of."

"Ah, yes, the man from beyond the western gates of Hercules. He who had surmised our secret."

"Yes. I learned of his plans in time. I managed to join his foolhardy expedition. Not for nothing have I made frequent journeys into the outland on the back of the Holy Dragon. He suspected nothing. Now he is delivered into your hands."

"You have done well, Theramenes. Alexander is pleased. Aspasia shall marry you; my command will be sufficient."

A crafty look crept into the assistant's face.

Crawford judged it time to intervene, before his mouth was stopped forever. He had been silently piecing the parts of the puzzle together; now the picture was tolerably clear.

"Beware, Alexander!" he cried out suddenly in a loud voice. "This man Theramenes meditates evil—"

Fast as he was, the pseudo-archaeologist was even faster. "Shut his sacrilegious mouth, guards!" he shouted in stentorian tones.

Brawny hands choked off further utterance. Crawford did not struggle.

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"Take him to his dungeon," Theramenes ordered, "to await the commands of the divine Alexander."

The American was whirled roughly around, and dragged, rather than permitted to walk, through the valley. Back into the rock cell, locked into the chains, and the final bolting of the outer door, brought chilling realization that Theramenes would never now permit his freedom. That was all to obvious.

Crawford lay in the dim light on the moldy straw, cursing himself for a thick-witted, blundering fool. A few minutes of wholehearted self-excoriation brought some measure of comfort, and he sat up. If only he could unlock or saw through the chains! He examined them once more, stared at the edge of the stone pallet. Given time and infinite patience the bronze might wear through by rubbing back and forth. But it meant days, and Crawford felt his fate would be decided within the day.

SUDDENLY his sharpened senses heard something; the soft, slow opening of the dungeon door. He crouched against the pallet, his chained legs dragging, determined to meet death fighting.

The door swung wider, and a figure glided in. Crawford barely choked off an exclamation. It was Aspasia, and her finger was to her lips in the ancient gesture for silence.

"Do not make a noise, if you wish to live," she said in low, urgent tones. "I trust you, stranger, more than I do Theramenes." Her features darkened. "My father commands me

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to marry him; I hate him; I fear his ways. The olive is not more bland, nor the serpent swifter to strike. I heard all in the audience chamber; I heard your accusation. Tell me more."

Crawford stared at the eager girl, her classic repose flushed into warm tints. Something stirred queerly within him; something more than the faint possibility of escape.

"There is not much more to

tell," he stated quietly. "Theramenes deliberately mistranslated Kang Chou's threats when the proffered alliance was refused by your father; he whispered to the yellow man to wait for his talk. I am certain he meditates treachery."

Aspasia nodded vehemently. "I am sure of it. He is high in the councils of my father; there is no one he trusts more. It is he who was alone permitted to spy the outlands over years; it is he who has fed divine Alexander with thoughts of conquest. The outlands, he reports, are weak and ripe for the thunder of the phalanx."

Crawford laughed shortly. "Therein he lies," he told the girl. "Mighty as the Macedonians are, they are but a drop in the ocean of humanity. There is some other reason for his urging."

Aspasia flushed. "He is ambitious," she said unwillingly. "Often has he promised me a throne were I but his mate."

"Find some way to loose my chains," Crawford urged. "There is no time to be lost. Hurry."

"I brought a key with me," the girl acknowledged, and bent over.

So intent were they that the opening of the door roused no suspicion.

"Hold!" commanded a cold voice. "Move once, and die."

Aspasia started to her feet with a little cry; Crawford jerked at his chains fruitlessly.

Theramenes stood in the doorway, a spear poised for throwing. Next him stood Kang Chou, the snout of a revolver steady in his yellow hand.

The pseudo-archaeologist smiled unpleasantly. "Your Oriental wisdom is most subtle, Kang Chou. I foresee great deeds

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for our alliance. We are just in time."

The Chinese governor smiled softly. "Drop the key—over here." He pointed with the gun.

THE words were not understood, but the gesture was. Aspasia threw over the key and straightened up, her eyes flashing with ancient hauteur.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Theramenes grinned. "The very question I would ask you. Think what your father, divine Alexander, would say to his daughter freeing a prisoner."

A wild hope flashed through her.

"Take me to him, then. He shall be judge."

"Not so fast! he warned, and shut the door. His easy mockery changed to cold, wintry fury. "I heard your speech with this outlander. You will be given no chance to betray us. You remain my prisoner until—"

"Until what?" she asked.

"Until we are through," he ended cryptically.

Crawford said in deadly tones. "Listen to me, Theramenes. You harm Aspasia the least bit, and you sign your death warrant."

The Greek raised his eyebrows mockingly. "Threats?" he sneered. "From a prisoner, whose fate is already decided! Pray, Owen Crawford, to whatever gods you sacrifice to, for you have not long to live."

He raised the spear by the middle, hefted it once to test its balance. Aspasia gave a cry and threw herself forward. Theramenes brushed her aside with a quick heave of a powerful arm, into the close grasp of Kang Chou. Crawford ground his teeth in silence and strained at his bonds.

The spear was raised again. There was death in the backward movement of the hand. The muscles tensed for the quick heave. Aspasia screamed once.

The door banged violently open. Theramenes whirled, the spear darting for the thrust.

"Hold, mighty Theramenes!"

AN armored warrior plunged into the room, his face suffused with fast running, his breath whistling in stertorous pants. It was the dark-haired guard, the brutal one.

The Greek stayed his arm. "What is it, Nicias?" he demanded, thunder-browed.

Nicias leaned a moment against the damp rock. "We are discovered," he gasped at last.

Theramenes took a step forward, shook the bearer of the ill news furiously. "You lie! Who has betrayed us?"

Nicias cowered away from him. "I do not know," he cried. "But Alexander is even now

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gathering the phalanges. I received orders; I am thought loyal. At the first opportunity I fled to warn you. Master, what shall we do"

Terror was written large on the face of the wretch. Alexander's vengeance was apt to be lightning swift.

"Peace, fool!" commanded Theramenes. "If only—"

Aspasia said exultingly. "My father is still the divine Alexander. He overheard your speech with the yellow man. He learned the barbarous language secretly from a captive woman. His vengeance will be terrible."

Theramenes' furrowed brows cleared instantly.

"Thanks, Aspasia, for your explanation," he mocked. "Then Alexander knows very little; knows nothing of the Dragon. Quick, Kang Chou, we have not a moment to lose. The time is but hastened, that is all. You, Nicias, bind Aspasia, bolt the door, and follow us. We need every man. Your life depends on strict obedience."

With that he darted out of the door, the Chinese governor at his heels.

Nicias drew out from his tunic thin, flexible bronze links, and fastened the unresisting girl with the skill of long experience to a firmly imbedded ring on the opposite wall from Crawford. At the door he grinned cruelly at his two captives, slammed it shut. Their straining ears heard the sound of bolts being shot, the retreating clatter of the metal sandals; then there was silence.

Crawford gave another ineffectual heave and stared across at Aspasia. "What," he asked, "is the Holy Dragon?"

The girl shuddered against the dampness of the wall. "I do not know," she admitted, "except that it is a terrible monster. Only Alexander himself and Theramenes know the secret of governing it—and a few men sworn to silence on penalty of death."

"HOW strong is your father?" Crawford inquired irrelevantly.

The girl straightened proudly. "He is the mighty, the divine Alexander. He has lived two thousand years; the wisdom of the Greeks is his; he will crush the revolt as though it were a fly under a catapult."

"Does she really believe that nonsense?" the American wondered, and carefully avoided pursuing it further.

"But his phalanges are honeycombed with treachery," he argued aloud. "And the Dragon."

All Aspasia's pride collapsed. "That is true," she said weakly. "Theramenes will use the Dragon. If only we were free!"

"If we're not free in the next

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several hours," he told her; "it will be too late."

ALREADY outside the thickness of their door they could hear muted shoutings, the clang of running feet. The *ming-öi*, the House of a Thousand Rooms, was emptying its occupants; whether as loyal men or as rebels, the captives had no means of determining.

The revolt had begun.

Crawford groaned and strained fruitlessly. The bronze links bit painfully into his flesh. He tried rubbing against the stone edge, and succeeded only in rasping his legs into raw sores. There was fighting outside, and he was trussed up like a fowl for the slaughter, he and Aspasia.

The uproar grew; there was the faint noise of spear on shield. The opposing forces were locked in battle. Within the *ming-öi* was silence.

The two captives stared hopelessly at each other.

It was Aspasia, as nearer to the door, who first heard the faint fumbling.

"What is that?" she cried, near panic.

The fumbling continued, as of some one inexpert with locks. Then the door swung open, slowly, an inch at a time. Crawford tensed; what new horror was coming through now?

THE girl saw it first, cried out in fright. She shrank back against the wall.

A figure inched slowly around the barricade; a tattered, torn, bleeding figure. Grime and blood were mingled in equal proportions on that paunchy form, great raking gashes showed on flesh through slashed clothes.

The intruder turned slowly, and Crawford cried out:

"Aaron!"

The torn, broken figure thrust up its head, and grinned. "Master, my ancestors are good. I have found you."

The American gaped at his servant, returned from the dead. "I thought the Dragon—"

Aaron shuddered. "The Dragon, he terrible! He dropped me in a pit." The man of Tientsin swayed and groped to the wall for support. He was weary and pain-stricken. "That pit, I never forget. Bones and rotting bodies of others he dropped. It was deep I fell, but I was not killed. All night and day it took, I climbed out. I met a woman, woman of the Gobi. She took pity, hid me, told me where you prisoner."

Crawford flamed into action.

"The key, Aaron!" He pointed to the flung bit of bronze unregarded on the floor. "Open our chains; we have work to do."

The servant lumbered weakly to the key, picked it up, and with many a groan, unlocked his

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master. At the girl he looked doubtfully, but unloosed her, too, while Crawford stamped to bring circulation back into his veins.

There was the old exultant ring to his voice. To Aspasia, in Greek, he said: "We shall fight for your father."

To Aaron, in English: "Have you still your gun?"

Aaron searched through the voluminous folds of his slashed fragments of clothes. Crawford watched with growing fear. His own gun had been taken away. At last the yellow hand emerged, bringing with it an automatic.

The American reached for it with a cry of joy, broke it open, spun the cylinders. It was fully loaded. He felt better now.

"The Dragon, Aaron! What was it?"

Fear clouded the paunchy servant's eyes. "I did not see. Its claws caught me, held me tight in the long journey. I hung face downward; I could hear the noise of its nostrils, the flames of its breath were hot around me, but I saw it not."

Crawford made a gesture of annoyance. "Then we'll have to find out for ourselves. Come!"

Out of the door they went, into freedom, into deserted corridors. The *ming-öi* was empty. A door stood open to one side. Crawford glanced in. The next instant he was inside, and out again in a moment, with a spear.

He hefted it lovingly, thrust the automatic back to Aaron.

"Now we're both armed."

Then they were in the valley. It was a bloody, yet stirring picture that presented itself to them.

V.

THE pleasant green fields were trampled down as if an army had beaten them with flails. The meandering stream was choked with corpses, through whose sprawling forms the water trickled and spread. Farther up, near the temple, a battle was in furious progress—opposing armies, almost equal in numbers, on whose bronze armor and gleaming shields the warm sun sparkled with almost unendurable brilliance.

The formation of the phalanges had been broken; it was confused, man-to-man fighting now. Spears thrust home, dipped, and rose again, reddened at the tip. Short, heavy swords hacked furiously down, cutting through helmets and shields and breastplates with shearing force. Shouts and ancient Greek battle cries mingled with the groans of the dying. No one yielded; the tide of battle ebbed and flowed; men died as they stood.

Grim war as only the Greeks once fought! Platea and Mara-

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thon and Thermopylae. It was thrilling; it was magnificent!

Aspasia cried suddenly: "My father!"

A tall figure, on whose shield a huge ruby gathered the rays of the sun and thrust them out again in blood-red waves, was in the very thick of the battle, laying about him with a short sword that cleared men out of his path like grain before the reaper.

"We must help him," she said, and started forward.

Crawford held her with a restraining arm. He was looking the other way, where the stream ended in the lake, on which the monster had floated earlier in the day.

It was still there, quiescent, its claws concealed, its long tail no longer lashing, the sun reflected from the metallic scales of its body, breathing no fire or smoke.

"That is where we are needed," Crawford said grimly. "Your father will have to take care of himself a while longer."

Spear swinging in hand, he started on the run. They had gone a hundred yards, when Crawford stopped short with a groan.

"Too late!" he said. "The Dragon has started."

The trio stared in silence.

The great beast was belching flame from every pore, its tail lashed into venomous life. The waters of the lake were tossed into foaming spume. The Dragon started to move, slowly at first, as the flames from its tail lengthened, and red-pitted eyes and widespread nostrils spewed smoky glares; then faster and faster, until with a bound it was in the air.

Higher and higher it fled, the great claws distended beneath as though seeking its prey; then it swerved, and like the wind was careening down the narrow valley, belching and roaring, straight for the tangled, locked armies.

Crawford jerked the girl suddenly toward him, thrust her behind the concealment of an overhang of the *ming-öi*.

"Down, Aaron!" he shouted, throwing himself flat. "It must not see us."

Crouching in their precarious shelter, they watched with growing horror the tragedy that followed.

THE fighting troops had seen by this time the swift approach of the monster. They were brave, these descendants of the Macedonians, as brave as any men of any age in the world, but they had been brought up to fear the mysterious Dragon. It had roared on occasion out of the valley and brought back terrified, tongue-tied captives; it

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had swooped on condemned criminals and dropped them from heights into the terrible pit of the dead, but never had any except the few initiates seen the monster at close hand.

Now it was coming to attack —whom?

Neither side knew; few of the rebels, chiefly of blood filtered through Kazak captives, were in the closest counsels of Theramenes.

So it was that at the sight of the plunging, fiery serpent of the air, the contending armies broke. Loyal troops and rebels alike threw away their arms in a wild stampede for safety.

The great Dragon swooped with the noise of a thousand thunderbolts. Straight down to within fifty feet of the plain, then it straightened out and fled parallel in huge concentric circles. Its belly opened into a veritable fountain of detonating flame that seared the ground to blackened stone and crisped the running men to char and ash.

Suddenly the belching ceased, and once more the Dragon swooped. Aspasia cried out in helpless horror. For the great claws extended and caught on a man—a man who remained on the field of battle, proudly erect, disdaining to run, a man whose shield was centered with a blood-red ruby.

The claws retracted and Alexander disappeared. The Dragon swept upward in its headlong flight, back in the direction of the lake.

"My father!" moaned Aspasia.

Crawford held her in a steely grip. His brow was furrowed, puzzled. Suddenly it cleared. "Of course!" he almost shouted.

"What, master?" Aaron asked. He was trembling uncontrollably.

Crawford disregarded the question. "Give me your revolver; take the spear," he said urgently. "Whatever happens, whatever you see, guard Aspasia. If I fail, hide, and run for the mountain during the night. Good-by."

He stood up, stepped from behind his shelter, exposed to full view of the swiftly flying Dragon.

"Don't!" Aspasia screamed. "It will kill you as it killed my father. I, too, shall die then."

She struggled to rise, but Aaron held her by force. His master was mad, but he had given orders, and they must be obeyed.

AT first Crawford thought the Dragon had not seen him; that it was continuing to the lake of its sojourn. But in midflight it swerved, circled once to check its tremendous speed, dropped perpendicularly with steely claws hideously out-

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spread. For a moment Crawford was shaken; would the monster sear him with fire and flame? But the great scaly belly remained cold; only from tail and nostrils gushed streamers of blazing smoke. The monster wished to capture him, even as it had Alexander.

Crawford stood relaxed, steeling himself against the ripping thrust. His gun was pocketed, out of sight.

The Dragon came on with a rush. The wicked, razor-sharpened claws reached down, bit ruthlessly into his naked flesh, whirled him aloft into the air with a screaming of wind and snorting roars. Below, Aspasia promptly fainted, and Aaron invoked all his ancestors on behalf of his doomed master.

Crawford felt the blood dripping steadily from his sides, every movement exquisite anguish, but he squirmed around until he was staring up at the belly of the fabulous beast. It was scaly, unbroken, and rippled with the similitude of life. Behind, he could see the huge tail lashing through the atmosphere.

In all his life Crawford had never experienced the sinking sensation he now felt in the pit of his stomach. Had he been mistaken? If so, he was as good as dead. A revolver bullet would be but a flung pebble to this fiery Dragon; he would be dashed to splintered bones in the pit of the dead.

Then it happened!

The great belly yawned open like a gaping mouth; the claws that held Crawford retracted, thrust him into the darkness inside. The steely prongs released their cruel bite, withdrew, and the belly closed around him—like Jonah in the whale.

The pain of his wounds dizzied Crawford. He staggered, fell. Then there was light. The semi-darkness sprang into illumination. All around him was a soft, steady roaring.

The archaeologist came to his feet again, unsteadily. He was in a small, ovoid chamber, metal-sheathed; at either end were strange instruments of a type he had never seen before. There were voices, too, of men; the sound of Chinese diphthongs, of the rolling Greek of Homer.

Theramenes regarded him with a thin-lipped smile. "You are a hard man to keep put." The American idiom sounded incongruous in his slurred English. "What do you think of our Dragon?"

"I've known its secret for some time," Crawford lied quietly. "It's a rocket plane."

"You are indeed intelligent."

"The Chinese have reported the worship of the Holy Dragon for centuries. Who invented it?"

"My ancestor, twelve times re-

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moved. He found bitumen in the lake, refined it for fuel. His descendants are the hereditary captains of the Dragon."

HE might have been lying, but it didn't matter. Crawford's head had cleared, but he swayed in pretense of faintness. His wounds ached horribly; the blood went drip, drip, down his sides.

"What do you intend doing with me?" he asked faintly. He had not been searched; no one knew that Aaron had escaped with a weapon.

"Do?" Theramenes said. "Throw you into the pit of the dead. This time you will stay put. You and the Alexander who thought he was divine."

For the first time Crawford saw the old man, lying in a pool of blood to one side. His breathing was labored, stertorous. If Crawford read the signs aright he was dying. No help could be expected from him. The American half closed his eyes, to simulate exhaustion; from beneath locked lashes he warily surveyed the scene.

There were three men in the crew, besides Theramenes and Kang Chou. All armed, no doubt, the latter two with guns. Five against one! It would be a chance that he must take.

Theramenes said: "The devil, Aspasia. I had almost forgotten her. We shall turn back. She must be where we found the American."

Now was the time to act, if ever. Crawford felt real nausea at the thought of those cruel claws gashing that tender flesh. His hand stole unobtrusively to the pocket where the automatic rested.

But Kang Chou, with the guile of the Oriental, had not been deceived by his play acting. "He is shamming!" he cried in warning. "Look out!"

CRAWFORD completed his move in split seconds. His hand tore at the pocket, leaped out, gun muzzle in front, finger pressing against trigger.

A shot rang reverberating in the narrow confines. Kang Chou had fired first. Something burned across Crawford's arm; then his pistol spoke. It smashed the pointing gun out of the Chinese governor's hand, then the bullet deflected and plowed through the wrist, breaking it. Kang Chou cursed horribly and sat down.

Crawford whirled, balancing lightly. Just in time, for the Greek renegade was pressing home the trigger, a light of insane hatred in his slanted eyes.

Two shots rang out, almost simultaneous in their report. The wind of it tugged at the American's ear; but Theramenes

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stared in wide surprise, then slid slowly to the floor, a bluish round hole in his forehead.

Once more Crawford whirled to meet the rush of a Macedonian, spear drawn back for the fatal lunge. Just then the Dragon took a sickening plunge; the steersman had left the controls. The spear whizzed harmlessly past, to clang metallically against the concave wall. Crawford braced himself, and shot. The man screamed and fell.

"Back to your posts!" the American shouted at the remaining pair.

With a wild rush they obeyed. The fight was gone out of them. They had never seen a gun before, nor known of its terrible execution. Theramenes had kept the secrets he had learned in the outer world to himself.

The Dragon was plunging and swinging erratically, its rocket jets, cleverly concealed in nostrils, eyes, mouth, and tail, roaring and sputtering. The steersman swung swiftly on a series of rudders; the great beast shuddered and steadied into smooth, slanting flight.

"Land here," Crawford ordered, and gave directions.

The cowed Macedonians obeyed. Kang had stopped cursing salty Chinese oaths; he sat holding his shattered wrist, his face philosophically calm.

Aspasia and Aaron came running in through the opened belly, eyes wide with astonishment. Then the girl saw her father. With a cry she dropped to his side.

The old Alexander's stern, pain-wracked face softened into a smile. He was only a weary old man, about to die.

"Do not cry, my daughter," he whispered with evident effort. "It was my mad ambition that was responsible for the tragedy to my peaceful land. Theramenes, the traitor, urged me on. He is dead; so am I."

Aspasia flung herself upon him, sobbing. "No, no! You shall live, you must."

His smile held rare quality. "It is too late! The gods are calling me; the ancient gods."

He half rose. His voice was loud: "Jupiter Ammon, your son comes!" He fell back, dead. To the last he was Alexander, Iskander, the divine!

ASPASIA cried quietly, while Aaron patted her hand clumsily. Crawford looked out of the tiny porthole. The scattered remnants of the rebels had reformed, were advancing on the Dragon, five phlanges strong. Brave men, thought the American admiringly.

He turned to give orders to take off, when something else caught his attention. He stiffened incredulously. The air was

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full with droning noise. Five airplanes, bombers of an American make, were winging in battle formation over the inaccessible valley of the Heavenly Mountains.

The placid calm of Kang Chou wreathed into a smile. "It is my turn now," he remarked. "Those planes are mine, from Turfan. I left instructions. The pilots are foreigners, reckless fools who fear neither man nor devil. They come ahead of time, to seize the Dragon. It will be useful to convince my countrymen I am a good ruler."

But Crawford was not listening. Already the airplanes had deployed over the armed forces. Bombs dropped with deadly precision. The valley lifted and heaved. The temple was shattered into wind-borne fragments, the *ming-öi* House of a Thousand Rooms, was blasted from the side of the mountain. The strange, anachronistic civilization of two thousand years was being effectually wiped out.

Then a pilot saw the resting Dragon. The planes wheeled, came in a long, slanting rush. Crawford jumped into action, roaring orders. The terrified Macedonians saw the oncoming death, sprang frantically to the rudders.

The great monster shuddered throughout its sinuous length; jerked forward as the rocket tubes burst into roaring flame. Along the ground it bumped interminably, while the combat planes whistled with the speed of their flight.

The leader was almost upon them. Crawford could see the helmeted face of the pilot reaching for the bomb trip, when the Dragon gave a great lurch and left the ground. It was up in the air, gathering speed.

The bombers whirled around, darted headlong for the fleeing prey. Machine-gun bullets whined and zipped; a pellet of steel ripped through the outer shell, ripped out again through the opposite side.

The Macedonians needed no urging now. The rudders controlling the rocket jets swung wide. The acceleration fairly hurled the great beast through the air. No plane could hope to keep pace with the hurtling Dragon.

Four of the bombers were dropping fast behind; one, the leader, held to the pace for a grim half minute. Kang Chou half rose, his mask ripped off.

The pursuing pilot saw that he was losing ground, in desperation he sent a last wild fusillade toward the fleeing monster. One bullet found its mark. It crashed through the belly, caught Kang Chou in the chest.

He spun around, mouth half open, and sprawled forward.

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The Dragon lifted high over the encircling peaks, flaming and snorting at every pore; over the accustomed trail to Dead Mongol Pass, toward the encampment of the expedition in the hollow of the Black Gobi.

For some reason Crawford felt curiously happy as Aspasia nestled against his shoulder. No words were spoken; there was silence except for the curious throbbing of the unknowing Dragon.

THE END

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All peoples have their myths of wanderers through time . . . who, though they may not end their own sufferings, have the power to help others save themselves . . . Such a one was the gaunt man.

a DRINK of DARKNESS

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Illustrator SCHELLING

"YOU'RE *walking down Fool's Street,*" Laura used to say when he was drinking, and she had been right. He had known even then that she was right, but knowing had made no difference; he had simply laughed at her fears and gone on walking down it, till finally he stumbled and fell. Then, for a long time, he stayed away, and if he had stayed away long enough he would have been all right; but one night he began walking down it again—and met the girl. It was inevitable that on Fool's Street there should be women as well as wine.

He had walked down it many times since in many different towns, and now he was walking down it once again in yet another town. Fool's Street never changed no matter where you went, and this one was no different from the others. The same skeletonic signs bled beer names in naked windows, the same winos sat in doorways nursing muscatel; the same drunk tank awaited you when at last your reeling footsteps failed. And if the sky was darker than usual, it was only because of the rain which had begun falling early that morning and which had been falling steadily ever since.

Chris went into another bar, laid down his last quarter and ordered wine. At first he did not see the man who came in a moment later and stood beside him. There was a raging rawness in him such as even he had never known before, and the wine he had thus far drunk had merely served to aggravate it. Eagerly he drained the glass which the

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bartender filled and set before him. Reluctantly he turned to leave. He saw the man then.

THE man was gaunt—so gaunt that he seemed taller than he actually was. His thin-featured face was pale, and his dark eyes seemed beset by unimaginable pain. His hair was brown and badly in need of cutting. There was a strange statuesqueness about him—an odd sense of immobility. Raindrops iridesced like tiny jewels on his gray trench coat, dripped sporadically from his black hat. "Good evening," he said. "May I offer you a drink?"

For an agonizing moment Chris saw himself through the other's eyes—saw his thin sensitive face with its intricate networks of ruptured capillaries; his gray rain-plastered hair; his ragged rain-soaked overcoat; his cracked rain-sodden shoes—and the image was so vivid that it shocked him into speechlessness. But only briefly; then the rawness intervened. "Sure I'll have a drink," he said, and tapped his glass upon the bar.

"Not here," the gaunt man said. "Come with me."

Chris followed him out into the rain, the rawness rampant now. He staggered, and the gaunt man took his arm. "It's only a little ways," the gaunt man said. "Into this alley here . . . now down this flight of stairs."

It was a long gray room, damp, and dimly lit. A gray-faced bartender stood statuesquely behind a deserted bar. When they entered he set two glasses on the bar and filled them from a dusty bottle. "How much?" the gaunt man asked.

"Thirty," the bartender answered.

The gaunt man counted out the money. "I shouldn't have asked," he said. "It's always thirty—no matter where I go. Thirty this, or thirty that; thirty days or thirty months or thirty thousand years." He raised his glass and touched it to his lips.

Chris followed suit, the rawness in him screaming. The glass was so cold that it numbed his fingertips, and its contents had a strange Cimmerian cast. But the truth didn't strike him till he tilted the glass and drained the darkness; then the quatrain came down from the attic of his mind where he had stored it years ago, and he knew suddenly who the gaunt man was—

So when at last the Angel of the Drink
Of Darkness finds you by the river-brink,
And, proffering his Cup, invites your Soul
Forth to your Lips to quaff it—do not shrink.

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But by then the icy waves were washing through him, and soon the darkness was complete.

DEAD! The word was a hoarse and hideous echo caroming down the twisted corridor of his mind. He heard it again and again and again—*dead . . . dead . . . dead*—till finally he realized that the source of it was himself and that his eyes were tightly closed. Opening them, he saw a vast starlit plain and a distant shining mountain. He closed them again, more tightly than before.

"Open your eyes," the gaunt man said. "We've a long ways to go."

Reluctantly Chris obeyed. The gaunt man was standing a few feet away, staring hungrily at the shining mountain. "Where are we?" Chris asked. "In God's name, where are we!"

The gaunt man ignored the question. "Follow me," he said, and set off toward the mountain.

Numbly Chris followed. He sensed coldness all around him but he could not feel it, nor could he see his breath. A shudder racked him. Of course he couldn't see his breath—he had no breath to see. Any more than the gaunt man did.

The plain shimmered, became a playground, then a lake, then a foxhole, finally a summer street. Wonderingly he identified each place. The playground was the one where he had played as a boy. The lake was the one he had fished in as a young man. The foxhole was the one he had bled and nearly died in. The summer street was the one he had driven down on his way to his first post-war job. He returned to each place; played, fished, swam, bled, drove. In each case it was like living each moment all over again.

Was it possible, in death, to control time and relive the past

He would try. The past was definitely preferable to the present. But to which moment did he wish to return? Why, to the most precious one of all, of course—to the one in which he had met Laura. *Laura,* he thought, fighting his way back through the hours, the months, the years. "Laura!" he cried out in the cold and starlit reaches of the night—

And the plain became a sun-filled street—

HE and Minelli had come off guard duty that noon and had gone into the Falls on a twelve-hour pass. It was a golden October day early in the war, and they had just completed their basic training. Recently each of them had made corporal, and they wore their chevrons in their eyes as well as on their sleeves.

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The two girls were sitting at a booth in a crowded bar, sipping ginger ale. Minelli had made the advances, concentrating on the tall dark-haired one. Chris had lingered in the background. He sort of liked the dark-haired girl, but the round-faced blonde who was with her simply wasn't his cup of tea, and he kept wishing Minelli would give up and come back to the bar and finish his beer so they could leave.

Minelli did nothing of the sort. He went right on talking to the tall girl, and presently he managed to edge his stocky body into the seat beside her. There was nothing for it then, and when Minelli beckoned to him Chris went over and joined them. The round-faced girl's name was Patricia and the tall one's name was Laura.

They went for a walk, the four of them. They watched the American Falls for a while and afterward they visited Goat Island. Laura was several inches taller than Minelli, and her thinness made her seem even taller. They made a rather incongruous couple. Minelli didn't seem to mind, but Laura seemed ill at ease and kept glancing over her shoulder at Chris.

Finally she and Pat had insisted that it was time for them to go home—they were staying at a modest boarding-house just of the main drag, taking in the Falls over the weekend—and Chris had thought, *Good, now at last we'll be rid of them.* Guard duty always wore him out—he had never been able to adapt himself to the two hours on-two hours off routine—and he was tired. But Minelli went right on talking after they reached the boarding-house, and presently the two girls agreed to go out to supper. Minelli and Chris waited on the porch while they went in and freshened up. When they came out Laura stepped quickly over to Chris's side and took his arm.

He was startled for a moment, but he recovered swiftly, and soon he and Laura were walking hand in hand down the street. Minelli and Pat fell in behind them. "It's all right, isn't it?" Laura whispered in his ear. "I'd much rather go with you."

"Sure," he said, "it's fine."

And it was, too. He wasn't tired any more and there was a pleasant warmth washing through him. Glancing sideways at her profile, he saw that her face wasn't quite as thin as he had at first thought, and that her nose was tilted just enough to give her features a piquant cast.

Supper over, the four of them revisited the American Falls. Twilight deepened into darkness and the stars came out. Chris

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and Laura found a secluded bench and sat in the darkness, shoulders touching, listening to the steady thunder of the cataract. The air was chill, and permeated with ice-cold particles of spray. He put his arm around her, wondering if she was as cold as he was; apparently she was, for she snuggled up close to him. He turned and kissed her then, softly, gently, on the lips; it wasn't much of a kiss, but he knew somehow that he would never forget it. He kissed her once more when they said good night on the boarding-house porch. She gave him her address. "Yes," he whispered, "I'll write." "And I'll write too," she whispered back in the cool damp darkness of the night. "I'll write you every day . . ."

EVERY *day,* said the plain. *Every day,* pulsed the stars. *I'll write you every day . . .*

And she had, too, he remembered, plodding grimly in the gaunt man's wake. His letters from her were legion, and so were her letters from him. They had gotten married a week before he went overseas, and she had waited through the unreal years for him to come back, and all the while they had written, written written; *Dearest Chris* and *Dearest Laura,* and words, words, words. Getting off the bus in the little town where she lived, he had cried when he had seen her standing in the station-doorway, and she had cried too; and the years of want and of waiting had woven themselves into a golden moment—and now the moment was shreds.

Shreds, said the plain. *Shreds,* pulsed the stars. *The golden moment is shreds . . .*

The past is a street lined with hours, he thought, *and I am walking down the street and I can open the door of any hour I choose and go inside. It is a dead man's privilege, or perhaps a dead man's curse—for what good are hours now?*

The next door he opened led into Ernie's place, and he went inside and drank a beer he had ordered fourteen years ago. "How's Laura?" Ernie asked. "Fine," he said. "And Little Chris?" "Oh, he's fine too. He'll be a whole year old next month."

He opened another door and went over to where Laura was standing before the kitchen stove and kissed her on the back of the neck. "Watch out!" she cried in mock distress. "You almost made me spill the gravy."

He opened another door—Ernie's place again. He closed it quickly. He opened another—and found himself in a bar full of squealing people. Streamers drifted down around him, streamers and multicolored balloons. He burst a balloon with his

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cigarette and waved his glass. "Happy New Year!" he shouted. "Happy New Year!" Laura was sitting at a corner table, a distressed look on her face. He went over and seized her arm and pulled her to her feet. "It's all right, don't you see?" he said. "It's New Year's Eve. If a man can't let himself go on New Year's Eve, when *can* he let himself go?"

"But darling, you said—"

"I said I'd quit—and I will, too—starting tomorrow." He weaved around in a fantastic little circle that somehow brought him back to her side. "Happy New year, baby—Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year, darling," she said, and kissed him on the cheek. He saw then that she was crying.

He ran from the room and out into the Cimmerian night. *Happy New Year*, the plain said. *Happy New Year*, pulsed the stars. *Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never brought to mind* . . . The gaunt man still strode relentlessly ahead, and now the shining mountain occulted half the sky. Desperately Chris threw open another door—

HE was sitting in an office. Across the desk from him sat a gray-haired man in a white coat. "Look at it this way," the gray-haired man was saying. "You've just recovered from a long bout with a disease to which you are extremely susceptible, and because you are extremely susceptible to it, you must sedulously avoid any and all contact with the virus that causes it. You have a low alcoholic threshold, Chris, and consequently you are even more at the mercy of that 'first drink' than the average periodic drinker. Moreover, your alternate personality—your 'alcoholic alter ego'—is virtually the diametric opposite of your real self, and hence all the more incompatible with reality. It has already behaved in ways your real self would not dream of behaving, and at this point it is capable of behavior-patterns so contrary to your normal behavior-patterns that it could disrupt your whole life. Therefore, I beg you, Chris, not to unleash it. And now, good bye and good luck. I am happy that our institution could be of such great help to you."

He knew the hour that lay behind the next door, and it was an hour which he did not care to relive. But the door opened of its own accord, and despite himself he stepped across the dark threshold of the years . . .

He and Laura were carrying Friday-night groceries from the car into the house. It was summer, and stars glistened gently in the velvet-soft sky. He was

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tired, as was to be expected at the end of the week, but he was taut too—unbearably taut from three months of teetotalism. And Friday nights were the worst of all; he had always spent his Friday nights at Ernie's, and while part of his mind remembered how poignantly he had regretted them the next day, the rest of his mind insisted on dwelling on the euphoria they had briefly brought him—even though it knew as well as the other part did that the euphoria had been little more than a profound and gross feeling of animal relaxation.

The bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. "Damn!" he said, and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of Little Chris's tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

Slowly he withdrew it. Starlight caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. *What harm can one drink do?* his tautness asked. *One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?*

No, he answered. Never. *Yes,* the tautness screamed. *Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn't meant to be the bag would not have burst.* His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips . . .

When he returned to the patio Laura was standing in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. He knelt down and resumed picking up the potatoes, and perceiving what had happened, she came out, laughing, and helped him. Afterward she went down the street to her sister's to pick up Little Chris. By the time she got back, the bottle was half empty and the tautness was no more.

HE waited till she took Little Chris upstairs to put him to bed, then he got in the car and drove downtown. He went to Ernie's. "Hi, Chris," Ernie said, surprised. "What'll it be?"

"Shot and a beer," he said. He noticed the girl at the end of the bar then. She was a tall

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blonde with eyes like blue mountain lakes. She returned his gaze coolly, calculatingly. The whiskey he had already drunk had made him tall; the boilermaker made him even taller. He walked down to the end of the bar and slipped onto the stool beside her. "Have a drink with me?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. "why not?"

He had one too, soaring now after the earthbound months on ginger ale, all the accumulated drives finding vent as his inhibitions dropped away and his drunken alter ego stepped upon the stage. Tomorrow he would hate what he was tonight, but tonight he loved what he was. Tonight he was a god, *leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills.* He took the blonde to her apartment and stayed the night, and went home in the small hours, reeking of cheap perfume. When he saw Laura's face the next morning he wanted to kill himself, and if it hadn't been for the half-full bottle under the porch, he would have. But the bottle saved him, and he was off again.

It was quite a spree. To finance it, he sold his car, and weeks later, he and the blonde wound up in a cheap roominghouse in Kalamazoo. She stayed around long enough to help him drink up his last dollar, and then took off. He never went back to Laura. Before, when he had walked down Fool's Street, it had been the booze and the booze alone, and afterward he had been able to face her. But he could not face her now—not Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes. Hurting her was one thing; destroying her, quite another.

No, he had not gone back; he had accepted Fool's Street as his destiny, and gone on walking down it through the years, and the years had not been kind. The past was not preferable to the present after all.

THE shining mountain loomed death-tall against the star-flecked sky. He could face it now, whatever it was meant to be; but there was still one more door to open, one final bitter swallow remaining in the cup. Grimly he stepped back across the bottomless abyss of time to the little tavern on School Street and finished the glass of muscatel he had bought six years ago. Then he walked over to the window and stood looking out into the street.

He stood there for some time, watching the kids go by on their way home from school, and after a while the boy with Laura's eyes came into view. His throat constricted then, and the street swam slightly out of focus; but he went on watching, and pres-

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ently the boy was abreast of the window, chatting gaily with his companions and swinging his books; now past the window and disappearing from view. For a moment he almost ran outside and shouted, *Chris, remember me?*—and then, by the grace of God, his eyes dropped to his cracked shoes and his mind remembered his seedy suit and the wine-sour smell of his breath, and he shrank back into the shadows of the room.

On the plain again, he shouted, "Why didn't you come sooner, Mr. Death? Why didn't you come six years ago? That was when I really died!"

The gaunt man had halted at the base of the shining mountain and was staring up at the snow-white slopes. His very aspect expressed yearning, and when he turned, the yearning lingered in his eyes. "I am not death," he said.

"Who are you then?" Chris asked. "And where are we going?"

"*We* are not going anywhere. From this point you must proceed alone. I cannot climb the mountain; it's forbidden me."

"But why must *I* climb the mountain?"

"You do not have to—but you will. You will climb it because it is death. The plain you have just crossed and upon which you still stand represents the transition from life to death. You repeatedly returned to moments in your past because the present, except in a symbolic sense, no longer exists for you. If you do not climb it, you will keep returning to those moments."

"What will I find on the mountain?"

"I do not know. But this much I do know: whatever you find there will be more merciful than what you have found—or will ever find—on the plain."

"Who are you?"

The gaunt man looked out over the plain. His shoulders sagged, as though a great weight lay upon them. "There is no word for what I am," he said presently. "Call me a wanderer, if you like—a wanderer condemned to walk the plain forever; a wanderer periodically compelled to return to life and seek out someone on the verge of death and die with him in the nearest halfway house and share his past with him and add his sufferings to my own. A wanderer of many languages and much lore, gleaned through the centuries; a wanderer who, by the very nature of my domain, can move at will through the past . . . You know me very well."

CHRIS gazed upon the thin-featured face. He looked into the pain-racked eyes. "No," he said, "I do not know you."

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"You know me very well," the gaunt man repeated. "But through words and pictures only, and a historian cannot accurately describe a man from hearsay, nor can an artist accurately depict a face he has never seen. But who I am should be of no concern to you. What should be of concern to you is whether or not there is a way for you to return to life."

Hope pounded in Chris's brain. "And is there? Is there a way"

"Yes," the gaunt man said, "there is. But very few men have ever traveled it successfully. The essence of the plain is the past, and therein lies its weakness. Right now you are capable of returning to any moment of your life; but unless you alter your past while doing so, the date of your death will remain unchanged."

"I don't understand," Chris said.

"Each individual, during his life span," the gaunt man went on, "arrives at a critical moment in which he must choose between two major alternatives. Oftentimes he is not aware of the importance of his choice, but whether he is aware or not, the alternative he chooses will arbitrarily determine the pattern which his future life will follow. Should this alternative precipitate his death, he should be able, once he is suspended in the past, to return to the moment and, merely by choosing the other alternative, postpone his death. But in order to do so he would have to know which moment to return to—"

"But I do know which moment," Chris said hoarsely. "I—"

The gaunt man raised his hand. "I know you do—and having relived it with you, I do too. And the alternative you chose *did* precipitate your death: you died of acute alcoholism. But there is another consideration. Whenever anyone returns to the past he automatically loses his 'memory' of the future. You have already chosen the same alternative twice. If you return to the moment once more, won't the result be the same? Won't you betray yourself—and your wife and son—all over again?"

"But I can try," Chris said. "And if I fail, I can try again."

"Try then. But don't hope too much. I know the critical moment in my past too, and I have returned to it again and again and again, not to postpone my death—it is far too late for that—but to free myself from the plain, and I have never succeeded in changing it one iota." The gaunt man's voice grew bitter. "But then, my moment and its consequences are firmly cemented in the minds of men. Your case is different. Go then. Try.

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Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door. This time I will not accompany you vicariously; I will go as myself. I will have no 'memory' of the future either; but if you interpret my presence in the same symbolic way you interpreted it before, I may be of help to you. I do not want your hell too; my own and those of the others is enough."

The hour, the scene, the way he had felt. Dear God! . . . *It is a summer night and above me stars lie softly on the dark velvet counterpane of the sky. I am driving my car into my driveway and my house is a light-warmed fortress in the night; secure stands my citadel beneath the stars and in the womb of it I will be safe—safe and warm and wanted . . . I have driven my car into my driveway and my wife is sitting beside me in the soft summer darkness . . . and now I am helping her carry groceries into the house. My wife is tall and slender and dark of hair, and she has gentle eyes and a tender smile and much loveliness . . . Soft is the night around us, compassionate are the stars; warm and secure is my house, my citadel, my soul . . .*

THE bag of potatoes he was carrying burst open, and potatoes bounced and rolled all over the patio. "Damn!" he said, and knelt down and began picking them up. One of them slipped from his fingers and rolled perversely off the patio and down the walk, and he followed it angrily, peevishly determined that it should not get away. It glanced off one of the wheels of little Chris's tricycle and rolled under the back porch. When he reached in after it his fingers touched a cold curved smoothness, and with a start he remembered the bottle of whiskey he had hidden the previous spring after coming home from a Saturday-night drunk—hidden and forgotten about till now.

SLOWLY he withdrew it. Starlight caught it, and it gleamed softly in the darkness. He knelt there, staring at it, the chill dampness of the ground creeping up into his knees. *What harm can one drink do?* his tautness asked. *One drink stolen in the darkness, and then no more?*

No, he answered. Never. *Yes,* the tautness screamed. *Just one. A sip. A swallow. Hurry! If it wasn't meant to be the bag would not have burst.* His fingers wrenched off the cap of their own volition then, and he raised the bottle to his lips—

And saw the man.

He was standing several yards away. Statuesque. Immobile. His thin-featured face was pale. His eyes were burning pits of pain.

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He said no word, but went on standing there, and presently an icy wind sprang up in the summer night and drove the warmth away before it. The words came tumbling down the attic-stairs of Chris's mind then, and lined up on the threshold of his memory:

So when at last the Angel of the Drink
Of Darkness finds you by the river-brink,
And, proffering his Cup, invites your Soul
Forth to your Lips to quaff it—do not shrink.

"No," he cired, "not yet!" and emptied the bottle onto the ground and threw it into the darkness. When he looked again, the man had disappeared.

Shuddering, he stood up. The icy wind was gone, and the summer night was soft and warm around him. He walked down the walk on unsure feet and climbed the patio steps. Laura was standing in the doorway, her tall slenderness silhouetted softly against the living-room light. Laura of the tender smile, the gentle eyes; a glass of loveliness standing on the lonely bar of night—

He drained the glass to the last drop, and the wine of her was sweet. When she saw the potatoes scattered on the patio and came out, laughing, to help him, he touched her arm. "No, not now," he whispered, and drew her tightly against him and kissed her—not gently, the way he had kissed her at the Falls, but hard, hungrily, the way a husband kisses his wife when he realizes suddenly how much he needs her.

After a while she leaned back and looked up into his eyes. She smiled her warm and tender smile. "I guess the potatoes can wait at that," she said.

THE gaunt man stepped back across the abysmal reaches of the years and resumed his eternal wandering beneath the cold and silent stars. His success heartened him; perhaps, if he tried once more, he could alter his own moment too—

Think of the hour, the scene, the way you felt; then open the door . . . *It is spring and I am walking through narrow twisting streets. Above me stars shine gently in the dark and mysterious pastures of the night. It is spring and a warm wind is blowing in from the fields and bearing with it the scent of growing things. I can smell* matzoth *baking in earthen ovens . . . Now the temple looms before me and I go inside and wait beside a monolithic table . . . Now the high priest is approaching . . .*

The high priest upended the leather bag he was carrying and spilled its gleaming contents on

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the table. "Count them," he said.

He did so, his fingers trembling. Each piece made a clinking sound when he dropped it into the bag. *Clink . . . clink . . . clink.* When the final clink sounded he closed the bag and thrust it beneath his robe.

"Thirty?" the high priest asked.

"Yes. Thirty."

"It is agreed then?" he replied.

For the hundredth, the thousandth, the millionth time, he nodded. "Yes," he said, "it is agreed. Come, I will take you to him, and I will kiss his cheek so that you will know him. He is in a garden just outside the city—a garden named Gethsemane."

THE END

☆ ☆ ☆

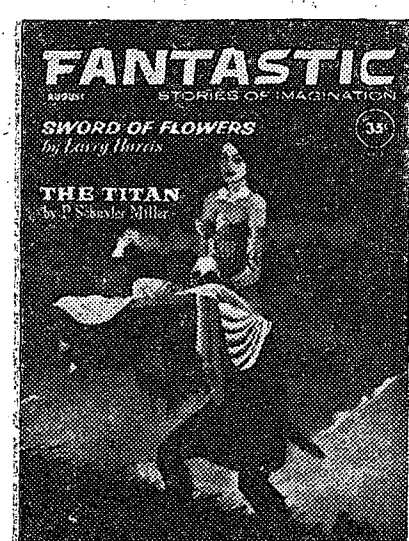
COMING NEXT MONTH

The Vernon Kramer cover on the August issue of *FANTASTIC* gives you a rough idea of how "far-out" that issue will be.

Right now we know that **Larry Harris'** cover-illo story, *Sword of Flowers*, will be one of the most unusual fantasy tales we've ever published.

And we know that the co-star in the August FANTASTIC will be the unforgettable Fantasy Classic, *The Titian*, by **P. Schuyler Miller.**

In addition there will be a handful of short stories—including some by either Arthur Porges, Jack Sharkey or Robert Young—as well as all our regular features.



Get the August FANTASTIC, at your newsstand on July 19.

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By POUL ANDERSON

Conclusion

SHIELD

SYNOPSIS

THE world after the atomic wars was big, scientific, productive, but hardly pleasant unless you had the skills and the kind of personality which automation and the Pax Americana demanded. Peter Koskinen had thought he did. A war orphan, he was raised and given intensive technical education in an

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institution; hardly had he graduated than his application for a berth on the ninth Mars expedition was accepted. That ship, the Franz Boas, *remained away for five years while the men studied the nonhuman Martian race and their enigmatic science. The Martians in turn learned from the Earthmen, and the fusion of ideas produced concepts new to both planets. Koskinen in particular, with his native friend Elkor, came up with something revolutionary, a potential barrier field coupled to an energy-storing device. When the machine was switched on, nothing that traveled at less than miles per second could penetrate the invisible screen. With an air renewer added, it enabled a man to travel about much more freely on Mars than the ordinary thermsuit. The expedition members were thinking only of such applications when they at last brought back a small portable model with them.*

Illustrator ADKINS

They were supposed to rest a few days before reporting formally to the Astronautical Authority which had sent them, and scattered to their homes. Koskinen, who had none, checked into a hotel in the Atlantic seaboard megapolis, taking the shield generator with him to have it handy. He was dismayed when two agents of Military Security arrested him for an interrogation that was obviously going to be thorough and ruthless. MS was the intelligence agency of the Protectorate, which the United States under the Norris Doctrine had unilat-

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erally imposed on Earth. No other country was allowed armed forces, and the United States reserved unlimited rights of inspection. What had Koskinen to do with that?

He found out when the aircar in which he was being taken away was attacked and captured by a Chinese stratoship. Though officially disowned by their governments, some nationalist organizations did exist in other countries and had accumulated weapons. It was an open secret that the Chinese dictatorship supported its own terrorists, but the problems of governing China directly were so hopeless that the Protectorate must needs wink at this. Koskinen was still more appalled when the agents of his own country tried to kill him to keep his knowledge from Chinese hands. Having some skill in judo, he managed to escape from them and jump overboard with his generator. The field protected him from injury when he landed in a slum area.

Bewildered, Koskinen tried to call a friend from the expedition, and learned that he had been arrested. News service told him that Twain, captain of the Boas, *had been murdered while resisting a kidnap attempt, apparently by Chinese agents. Feeling that everyone was after him and in his naivete not knowing why, Koskinen thought of hiding out somewhere. But he was captured by some of the bandits who roved freely about such parts of town as this. They had only intended to rob him. When he switched on his shield again, though, they realized they had something more valuable. Immobilized as long as the force shell surrounded him, he was carried to the atomic-bomb crater beneath which Zigger, the local robber baron, maintained a fortress. Koskinen thought he could outwait their patience in his impenetrable field. But a strikingly beautiful woman scientist quickly saw that if light could pass the barrier, so could a heat ray. Threatened, in writing, with a maser gun, Koskinen surrendered and turned off his generator.*

Somewhat later the woman invited him to a private dinner in her suite. Her name was Vivienne Cordeiro, a strong, high-IQ type with great sympathy for the prisoner. She explained the potentialities of the shield device which made Zigger want it so badly. Invulnerable gangsters could expand the Crater boss's operations, which were already large, until he might rule the entire underworld. This would be especially simple if shield generators that permitted men to move freely around could be developed—a mere question of engineering.

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Zigger ordered Koskinen to help Vivienne on this work. Worried by the disappearance of one of his men, the chief was brutal about it, but also offered rich payment for willing cooperation. To keep Koskinen from one day switching on the field in a place where heat rays couldn't reach, Vivienne was made to weld an explosive capsule around his neck, with a radio detonator that the chief kept.

When they were alone in the laboratory, the woman suggested wearily to Koskinen that he might as well join the gang. It was no worse than the government. Shocked, he denied this, even though MS had tried to kill him. She told him her own story —an orphaned refugee, rescued and raised much like him, she had entered government service as a science attache and married a Brazilian. Though she knew for a fact that he was innocent in a case of conspiracy against the Protectorate, he was nevertheless railroaded and executed. The reason, she found out later, was simply that MS thought he might some day make trouble. Embittered, Vivienne went down to the slums and, when she was kidnapped by Zigger, made no effort to escape but settled down as his technical aide as well as mistress. It was one way of striking back. She mentioned other cases she knew of, where the Protectorate had violated its own Norris Doctrine as well as all Constitutional guarantees. Hugh Marcus, Director of MS, was not one to let mere legality hamper him. If he got control of the shield effect—or the Chinese did, or anyone who had power—then invulnerability would remove the last checks on that power. "I'd rather Zigger got this thing," she finished. "All he wants, really, is plunder. Not the souls of the whole human race."

KOSKINEN came awake. What was that?

Maybe nothing. A dream, from which he'd escaped before it got too ghastly. He had perforce taken a pill to sleep, but that must have worn off by now. The luminous clock said 0415 EDST. Otherwise he lay in total blackness. And soundlessness, apart from the murmur in the ventilation grille. These thick walls effectively insulated every apartment. If an outside noise had roused him, it must have been loud indeed.

He rolled over and tried to doze off again, but instead he grew completely wakeful. What Vivienne had said today, and her tone and expression and whole posture, had disturbed him more than he wanted to admit.

I wouldn't know the score. Not really. My youth was spent in

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what amounted to a fancy boarding school. I never encountered outside, day-to-day reality. Not that the professors lied to us, or any such thing. They told us conditions were hard, and that we'd have to buck poverty, ignorance, tyranny, greed, and hate. But I see now their understanding of the situation was childish. They accepted their political opinions readymade, from official sources, because their work kept them too busy to do anything else.

I might have gone into the world with the rest of my classmates and had my nose rubbed in a few facts. But instead I shipped out to Mars. Now I come home, and the truth confronts me. And not piecemeal, so I can get used to it and accept it as sad but unavoidable. In one big brutal dose. I want to vomit it up again.

Only what is the truth? he thought wearily. *Who's right? What's the way out? If any.*

HE had spent the day in an emotionally stunned fashion, finding some anodyne in drawing up, with Vivienne's help, the diagrams and specifications for the shield unit. There seemed no choice but to obey Zigger. Lying now in bed, his fists clenched, he thought: *I've been pushed around too bloody often. Time I started some pushing of my own.* But the explosive locket and chain were like a hand around his neck. Maybe sometime, somewhere along the line, he could secretly make a cage to screen out the signal that would touch off the fulgurite. Maybe. Not soon, though. He'd have to bide his time, and watch his chance, and eat dirt—

A dull boom resounded.

Koskinen sprang out of bed. His heart skipped a beat and began galloping. Hoy—wasn't that a siren? He found the light switch. In that sudden illumination the room looked altogether bare. He tried the door. Locked, of course. He laid his ear against the panel and could just hear shouts, running feet . . . yes, certainly a siren, wailing elsewhere in the caverns.

He switched on the phone. It didn't respond. Were nonessential circuits cut off for the emergency, or had the central been destroyed? Another crash trembled through rock.

Raid! But who?

Zigger. Koskinen broke into a chill sweat. If a desperate Zigger pressed one certain button. . . . He discovered he was trying to snap the chain with his hands. Swiftly, futilely, he searched the apartment for anything that might cut metal. Nothing. He put on some clothes, set his teeth, and paced the floor, waiting.

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The racket increased outside. Another explosion came, and another. But he heard no more people go by. The fight must be some ways off, then. He couldn't do a thing except await events. He tried to recall his parents, and Elkor, and daydreams he had once nourished, but he was too tense. *Stupid,* he scolded himself. *If that bomb goes off, you'll never know it.* The realization did little to calm him.

A louder crash yet. The lights flickered and dimmed. The ventilator fan whirred to a halt.

Koskinen's mouth felt like Martian dust. He started to the cubby for a drink of water. The door opened. He whirled and crouched back.

VIVIENNE CORDEIRO stepped through, closing the door behind her. She wore a coverall, there was a pistol in her hand and an ungainly bundle on her back with a cloth draped over it. Her eyes were narrowed, the broad nostrils flared and her mouth bore a tight grin.

"There!" she panted. "Take this." She slipped the thing off her shoulders. The cloth fell away and Koskinen looked upon the shield unit. "A little heavy for me to run with."

"What—what—" He staggered toward her.

"Get it on, you clotbrain! We'll be lucky to escape as is."

Strength resurged. He heaved the metal up and put his arms through the straps. "What's happened?"

"Raiding party. Big one, with military equipment. Chinese, according to one guy at a monitor. They lobbed in a couple of small HE missiles from the air, which shook up our ack-ack long enough for them to land. Now they're blowing their way in past our defenses. We're equipped to stand off another gang or even a police siege, but not stuff like they've got!" She tucked the cloth firmly about his burden. "Into the cubby, now."

"What?"

She dragged him by the hand. "Everybody knows what you look like. But without those whiskers, you've got a fair chance of not being noticed. Quick!" She handed him the depple.

He ran it over his face, recognizing his chin again with a faint shock. Not having a very strong growth of beard, he could expect to be smooth-cheeked for a week or so without further plucking. The desensitizer spray felt cool on his skin.

Vivienne kept on talking: "I can guess how they did it, the Chinese. They knew approximately where you landed, so they sent a good many agents in to try and pick up your trail. Must have identified Bones in town—

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everybody in the neighborhood knows who the Crater people are —and put the snatch on him." She spared a sigh for poor old Bones and the treatment which was doubtless used to make him guide the attack. "Obviously they're shooting their wad. Every military weapon they've stockpiled in this country, secretly, over the years, must be out there. It's worth it, though. A China equipped with barrier screens could tell MS where to get off, build a nuclear arsenal again, and probably blackmail us out of Asia."

Koskinen shuddered.

"I can't take the chance they'll succeed," Vivienne said. "Especially since it looks as if they will get in here. I don't want another war either. So I got my gun and let myself into the lab. The plans we drew today are in this pocket." She slapped her hip.

"Wait." Koskinen remembered. He touched his throat.

She laughed, a short humorless bark. "Yes, I thought of that too. There's a direct passage between Zigger's suite and mine. He thought he had the only key, but I made myself a duplicate long ago. And I know where he keeps stuff like this. The minute he went out to command the defense, I popped in." Briefly she drew a small flat case with a button and a safety catch from another pocket. "Here's the detonator."

Koskinen snatched for it. She sidestepped him. "No, you don't. Now let's go. There isn't much time."

SHE opened the door first and peered into the hall. "Okay. Everything's clear." They stepped through. A guard sprawled outside. He had been shot in the head. Vivienne nodded. "Yes," she said. "Wasn't any other way to get in. Gimme a hand." They dragged him into the room and locked the door again with his key.

"Burned your bridges, eh?" Koskinen asked. In this corridor full of explosions, machine gun snarl, smoke and shock, he felt oddly callous about the murder.

"No," said the woman. "My bridges were burned for me quite some time ago. The day they killed Johnny. C'mon, this way."

They crossed a glideway which had gone motionless. The air already seemed stagnant and cooling. The sounds of battle grew fainter. Koskinen's pulse leaped when a squad of guards came loping past, but they paid him no special heed. Vivienne led him on down a side hall with plain, unnumbered doors. "Mostly they're storerooms," she said, "but this here—take the lead. Keep your hand on the switch

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and be ready to shield yourself when I tell you."

Beyond the room, another door gave onto a steep upward ramp. Koskinen's footfalls pattered between bare walls. His breathing was loud in his ears. He felt the strain in thigh and shoulder muscles, caught the sour smell of his own sweat. The lights were few and dim against whitewashed flatnesses.

Rounding a continuous curve, he came to the end without warning. An armored door blocked the passage ahead, where a machine gun pit held two sentries. Their helmets and gas masks made them unhuman. "Hold it, you two!" one called. The gun swiveled toward Koskinen.

"Shield," Vivienne hissed. He threw the switch. Silence clamped upon him. Vivienne, at his back, drew her gun and fired, full automatic. The first soldier lurched and fell. The machine gun raved, noiselessly for Koskinen. Bullets dropped at his feet. Vivienne continued to fire from behind him. The gunner collapsed.

She ran to the pit, looked at the men, and waved to her companion. He snapped off his shield and joined her. The blood glistened impossibly bright. This killing sickened him, perhaps because he had seen it done. "Did you have to?" he strangled.

Her nod was curt. "They'd never've let us by without a pass. Don't waste any grief on these bums. They did plenty of assassinations in their day." She pulled a control switch. "We've got to hurry. They probably sent an alarm."

A MOTOR whirred. The door swung ponderously open. Blackness gaped beyond. Vivienne took a flashlight from one guard's belt and scrambled over unfinished rock—a short, curved tunnel that roared and echoed with battle noise. Its entrance was camouflaged by a giant boulder. Koskinen halted in the stone's shadow and looked out.

Three big, lean aircraft hovered against the red sky. He could discern several others on the black surface near the main entrance; they were little more than metallic gleams, seen by lightning-like bursts as ground combat spilled across the crater bowl. Smoke hazed the scene as much as the night did. Koskinen was chiefly aware of confusion. But he distinguished the sounds: bang, crack, staccato rattle, then a rumbling as high explosive went off down in the tunnels.

"The Chinese must be gambling the police will figure this for only another gang clash," Vivienne said. "If the cops do try to intervene, naturally they'll be shot down. They haven't got

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any stuff to compare with that there. So then MS and the Army will be called in . . . but that'll take a little while. The Chinese must hope to be away with their booty—you, for one item—before matters progress that far."

"Where can we go?" he asked, stupefied at what he saw.

"Away. Come." She led him over a nearly invisible track that wound toward the rim. He stumbled after her. Now and then he fell, taking cuts and bruises which stung abominably. But the discovery and capture which terrified him didn't happen. They mounted the crater lip, scrambled down through snags and skeletons of blasted structures, and so into the labyrinth called low-level.

THEY stopped in an alley. Blank brick walls enclosed two sides and filled it with gloom. Light trickled from gray rectangles at either end, where the streets could be seen, empty at this hour save when the wind blew a dust cloud along or a rattling scrap of paper. Overhead ran a pneumotube and a tangle of power lines; beyond, the skyglow. They had come too far to hear the battle at the Crater, if it was still going on. Midnight growling and pounding, automatic machines, automatic traffic, made a background which smothered any remote noises that might otherwise have been heard. The air was cold and smelled faintly of sulfur compounds.

Koskinen sat down opposite Vivienne and let exhaustion overwhelm him. After a long time he was able to look across at her, where she huddled in the murk as another shadow, and say, "What next?"

"I don't know," she answered in a dead voice.

"The police—"

"No!" The violence of her denial shocked them both toward greater wakefulness. "Let me think a while," she said. She struck a cigaret on the wall—he heard the tiny *scrit* through all the city's grumble—and drank smoke till the red end flared into brilliance.

"Who else have we got to turn to?" he argued. "Another gang boss? No, thanks."

"Indeed not," she said. "Especially since the hue and cry will really be out, once MS picks up the pieces at the Crater and gets some idea of what happened. The word will get around. No baron will dare do anything but turn us in if he finds us."

"So let's save everyone a lot of trouble," he tried to laugh.

"How many times do you have to get kicked in the teeth before you learn not to walk behind that particular horse?" she snapped.

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"What do you mean? Okay, I admit they've killed. But—"

"Do you want to spend your life incommunicado?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, they may simply wipe your memory. Which runs a grave risk of disintegrating the entire personality. Mnemotechnics isn't the exact science it pretends to be." He thought she quailed in the darkness. "Me, I'd rather be put in a dungeon for life than have their probes go into my brain. A prisoner can always find some way to decently kill herself."

"But why? *I'm* not the rebel type."

"Figure it out. At present you, and only you on Earth, know how the screen generator works. A man like Marcus, who'd coldbloodedly frame and shoot an innocent person because he might someday make trouble . . . a man like that won't want to risk the secret getting out of his control. I don't say Marcus would actually plan on making himself the military dictator of the United States—not right away—but that's where he'd end, step by step. Because how do you effectively oppose a man who's got strong convictions, and power, and invulnerability?"

"You're exaggerating," he said.

"Shut up," she said. "Let me think."

THE wind whimpered. A train screamed down some track not far away. Vivienne's cigaret end waxed and waned.

"I know one spot we might aim for," she said at length. "Zigger has—had—a place upstate, under a different name. He took me there for a weekend now and then. It's stocked with supplies and weapons, like all his places. Got a special phone system, too: a shielded underground cable that sneaks into a public circuit several miles off, so you can buzz your friends without danger of having your call tapped or traced. We can lie low there for a while, and maybe get in touch with some reliable—Brazilian?—anyway, try to get ourselves smuggled out of the country."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. Maybe throw your unit and plans into the sea and hide out in some backwoods area for the rest of our lives. Or maybe we can think of something better. Don't bug me, Pete. I'm about ready to cave in as is."

"No," Koskinen said.

"What?" She stirred.

"Sorry. Perhaps I am too trusting. Or perhaps you aren't trusting enough. But when I signed for the Mars trip, I took an oath to support the Constitution." He climbed achingly to his feet. "I'm going to call MS to come get me."

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She rose too. "No, you don't!"

He clapped a hand on his generator switch. "Don't draw that gun," he said. "I can shield myself faster than you can shoot, and outwait you."

She stepped back, reached in a pocket and pulled forth the detonator. "Can you outwait this?" she answered unsteadily.

He gasped and made a move toward her. "Stop where you are!" she shrilled. He thought he heard a snick as she thumbed off the safety. "I'll kill you before I let you turn that thing over to him!"

Koskinen stood very still. "Would you?" he breathed.

"Yes . . . it's that important . . . it really is, Pete. You talked about your oath. D-d-don't you see — Marcus — he'd destroy what's left of . . . of the Constitution?" She began to cry, he heard her, but he could make out in the night that she still clutched the detonator.

"You've got everything wrong," he pleaded. "How do you know Marcus would act that way —or be able to if he wanted? He doesn't even have Cabinet rank. There're other branches of government, Congress, the courts, the President. . . . I can't outlaw myself just because—an opinion —you aren't giving them a chance, Vee!"

Silence fell between them again. He waited, thinking of many things, feeling his aloneness. Until she caught her breath with a gulp and said in a thin little voice:

"Maybe. I can't tell for sure. It's your machine, and your life, and—I suppose I could always go hide, personally. But I, I wish you'd really satisfy yourself . . . before you walk into their parlor . . . I wish you would. Once you're there it'd be too late. And you're too good for what might happen to you."

Dave, he remembered. For a long while he stood, shoulders hunched beneath his burden, thinking about Dave Abrams. *Anyway, I've been too passive. That's a shirking of responsibility, I suppose—but mainly, I'm fed to the eyeballs with being pushed around.*

A MINOR part of him was surprised to note how resolution brought back physical strength. He spoke quite steadily. "Okay, Vee, I'll do what you say. I think I know how, too."

She slipped the detonator back into her pocket and followed him mutely to the street. They walked several blocks before turning a corner and seeing a cluster of darkened shops with a public call booth outside. She gave him some coins—he had none in this suit—and posted herself by the door. Her cheeks gleamed wet in the dull lamp-

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light, but her lips had grown firm again.

Koskinen called first for a taxi. Then he punched for local MS headquarters. The telltale glowed crimson; government agencies always recorded calls. He didn't make a visual transmission. No sense in betraying his changed appearance before he must.

"Bureau of Military Security," said a woman's voice.

Koskinen stiffened. "Listen," he said. "This is urgent. Get your tape immediately to whoever's in charge. This is Peter Koskinen speaking, from the USAAS *Franz Boas*. I know you're looking for me, and I'm back at large with the thing you're after. But I'm not certain I can trust you. I tried to call a shipmate of mine, David Abrams, a couple of nights ago, and learned you'd hauled him in. That sounds suspicious to me. Maybe I'm wrong about that. But what I've got is too important to hand over blindly.

"I'm leaving now. I'll call again in half an hour from somewhere else. At that time I want you to have a hookup ready which will include Abrams. Understand? I want to see Abrams personally and satisfy myself that he's okay and not being unjustifiably held. Got me?"

He switched off and stepped from the booth. The taxi was already there, as he had hoped. Vivienne had prudently tucked her gun and holster into the coverall; the driver wouldn't have come near if he saw that. As it was, he wore a helmet and had a needler just like Neff's friend—dear God, only two nights ago? Standard equipment for low-level hackies, evidently. Koskinen and Vivienne got in. The driver said into a microphone—a blankout panel, doubtless bulletproof, hid him from the rear seat—"Where to?"

KOSKINEN was caught off guard. Vivienne said quickly: "Brooklyn, and fast."

"Got to swing wide of the Crater, ma'am. Wider than usual, I mean. Some kinda ruckus going on there, so Control's rerouted traffic."

"That's okay." Koskinen leaned back as much as the unit he wore permitted. They swung aloft. MS would probably have a car at the booth within minutes, but that would be too late. They might then check with Control, but the chances were that the computer would already have removed the fact that this one cab had stopped at that one corner from its circulating memory. Investigation of the various taxi companies would take more time than was available. *So I am on top of the situation,* Koskinen thought. *Barely.*

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BROOKLYN," the driver said after a short while. "Where now?"

"Flatbush tube station," Vivienne instructed.

"Hell, I'll getcha anywhere in the borough as cheap's the tubeway, now we're here, and a lot quicker."

"You heard the lady," Koskinen said. The driver muttered something uncomplimentary but obeyed. Vivienne gave him a handsome tip when they left. "Otherwise he might get so mad he'd check with the cops, hoping we are wanted," she explained as she boarded the escalator with her companion.

The gate took money and admitted them. They entered the tube, stepped onto the belt and found a seat.

Vivienne regarded Koskinen a while. "You're looking better now," she remarked.

"I feel a little better, somehow," he admitted. He slipped off the screen unit and laid it at his feet.

"Wish I could say the same." Her own eyes were bloodshot and edged with blackness. "I'm tired, though." She sighed. "Tired down into my bones. Not just the chase tonight. All the years behind me. Was there ever a small girl named Veevee in a room with blue ducks on the wallpaper? It feels more like something I read once in a book."

He took her hand, wordlessly, and dared slip the other arm across her shoulder. The dark head leaned against him. "I'm sorry, Pete," she said. "I don't want to go soupy on you. But do you mind if I cry a little? I'll be very quiet."

He held her closer. No one else paid any particular attention. He remembered the oneness of the ship's crew, and of the Martians, and eventually with the Martians . . . not a loss of freedom, rather an unspoken belongingness which gave meaning to a freedom that would otherwise have been empty . . . perhaps the grisliest thing he had found on Earth so far was the isolation of human beings from each other.

But what else could result, when a man was one atom in a deaf, dumb, blind, automated machine?

THEY rode with no special destination until his watch said it was about time to call MS again. Occasionally Koskinen switched the seat onto crosstube belts chosen at random. Vivienne had dozed a few minutes and seemed refreshed thereby. She walked springily with him to the gate when they got off.

Below the escalator, he looked around. They had come into a better district. The buildings on their side of the street were fairly new, with curving setback

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walls of tinted plastic, broad windows, and balconies. Across the avenue marched the cyclone fence that enclosed the parkscape around a Center. The building dominated the scene like a mountain, but Koskinen hardly noticed. He was too struck by the grounds themselves, grass ablaze with green, flowerbeds of red and blue and yellow, the graciousness of trees, beneath a sky that had turned pale in the east. *I'd almost forgotten that Earth is still the most beautiful planet,* he thought.

A uniformed guard watched them idly from behind the fence. A few early—or very late—ground cars whispered along the street; trucks and trains weren't allowed here. There was a cabstand close by, so no reason to phone for getaway transportation again.

Why getaway? Koskinen resisted. *Why not simply a ride down to the MS office?*

He wet his lips, made himself ignore his pulse, and entered the corner booth. Vivienne waited outside, guarding the shield generator. Her gaze never left him. He punched the number.

"Bureau of—"

"Koskinen," he said roughly. "Are you prepared to talk to me?"

"Oh! One moment." Click. A man's voice rapped: "This is Colonel Ausland. If you'll go on visual, Koskinen, I'll switch you over to Director Marcus himself."

"Okay." Koskinen put in the extra coin. "But bear this in mind, I don't have the machine. If you trace this call and snatch me, my confederate has instructions to take off for parts unknown. Unknown to me too, I'd better add."

The screen showed him an indignant face which quickly gave way to another—heavy, bushy-browed, with distinguished gray hair, Hugh Marcus in Washington. Koskinen had seen so many news pictures in his youth that he recognized the man at once.

"Hello, there," said Marcus quite gently. "What's the matter? What are you scared of, son?"

"You," Koskinen said.

"Well, you've obviously had some rough experiences, but—"

"Quiet! I know damn well I haven't much time before your agents can get to where I am. I've been treated pretty high-handedly, Marcus, and I want some assurance from a person I can trust that it was only because of circumstances and not because your bureau has grown too big for its britches. Got Dave Abrams ready to talk to me?"

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute." Marcus raised one large

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manicured hand. "Don't go off half programmed like that. We took Abrams into custody, yes. For his own protection, same as we wanted to protect you. He's perfectly okay—"

"Let him tell me so. Quick, there!"

MARCUS flushed but continued mildly: "Why Abrams in particular? It so happens we can't bring him on such short notice. We tucked him away in a Rocky Mountains hideout, and saw no reason why he and the agents guarding him shouldn't get in some fishing. So they're off in the woods, and atmospherics are such that their talkie sets evidently won't reach our nearest closed-circuit relay."

"*I* say you've shot him full of mind dope and couldn't wring him dry that fast. So long, Marcus." Koskinen reached for the switch.

"Wait a second!" Marcus yelled. "Will you talk to Carl Holmboe? We've got him standing by for you, safe and sound."

The engineering officer—Koskinen swayed on knees gone rubbery. "Sure," he husked. "Put him on."

The image changed. A balding walrus-mustached man regarded Koskinen, in his own screen, with a dazed expression.

"Hello, Carl," Koskinen said softly.

"Oh. Pete." Holmboe's eyes flickered sideways. Did a guard with a gun stand beyond pickup range? "What's got into you?"

"I'm not sure," Koskinen said. "How're they treating you?"

"Fine. Shouldn't they be? I'm fine."

"You don't look it."

"Pete—" Holmboe swallowed. "Come on home, Pete. I don't know what the score is, except that you insist on being told they won't hurt you at MS. Well, they won't."

Koskinen paused. Stillness hummed from the phone. Through the booth windows, he saw the western stars go out as the sun came closer. Vivienne had not stirred from her place.

He forced tongue and larynx into those deep croaks which were the closest men would ever come to High Martian Tactile. *"Carl, Sharer-of-Hopes, is there a reality in what you attest?"*

Holmboe started. His face turned still whiter. "Don't call me that!"

"Why should I not name you Sharer-of-Hopes, as our whole band named each other that night in the shrine with the Martians and the Philosopher's Sending? I will come to you if you tell me in the pledge language that there is no wrongness intended."

Holmboe tried to speak and could not.

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"Sharer-of-Hopes, I know the danger to yourself," Koskinen said. *"Were that the only aspect of this plenum, I would come at once. But I believe, in the night way I learned on Elkor's tower, that more is at hazard than life."*

"Go swiftly and far," Holmboe told him.

He shook himself, leaned forward, and barked in English: "Lay off that crap, Pete. You must be having a brain typhoon or something, the way you're acting. If you want me to swear in Martian that it's safe to come here, okay, I've sworn. So quit making a jackass of yourself."

"S-sure. I'll come," Koskinen said. "I, uh, I have to stop and get the machine from the person I left it with. But then I'll go straight to the nearest MS office." He drew a breath. His throat felt thick, as if he had swallowed the bomb that was chained beneath it, and his eyes stung. "Thanks, Carl," he said somehow.

"Yeah. I'll be seeing you."

I hope so.

Koskinen blanked the screen. Maybe Carl was off the hook now. Maybe he'd gained a little time for himself to . . . to do whatever came next. Existence grant that this be. There had been so much death.

He left the booth. Vivienne seized his hand. "What's the word, Pete?"

He picked up the unit. "Let's get away while we can," he answered sharply.

THEY approached the stand. The taxis were new and shiny here, the drivers unarmed. "This line doesn't enter the slums," Vivienne muttered. "Sure we want it?"

"Not much choice, I'm afraid. I can't have stalled MS for many minutes, and they can stop the tubeways, can't they?"

The nearest cabman gave them a knowing grin. Koskinen looked respectable, for his dark outfit didn't show the dirt actually there, and his companion like a pickup with whom he'd been touring the low-level taverns. Alcohol, joy juice, maybe an hour of electric brain tickling, then a stim pill and so to bed. "Where you headed, sir?"

"Syracuse," Vivienne said. Koskinen assumed she meant to change cars several times. They got in. The driver punched for top speed, uppermost Controlled level. There Koskinen glimpsed the rising sun and the ocean burning with light. Megapolis itself became a romantic tower-pierced mistland.

The blankout panel began to slide across the middle of the cab. "No," Vivienne said. "Stop. Retract that thing."

The driver looked surprised, but obeyed. "I . . . I like to watch

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the view in front too," she said lamely. Since that was nothing but a sky, turning from silver to blue as the sun mounted, Koskinen doubted the driver was convinced.

Wait! She had leaned forward to give her order. Recollection leaped through Koskinen. He reached around her back, into her left pocket. "What the devil!" she exclaimed, and tried to twist about. His right hand stopped her with a grip on the arm. He pulled the detonator out and let her go. She crouched away from him, spitting an oath.

He grinned. "No hard feelings, Vee," he said. "We're bound in the same direction anyhow, aren't we? But I want to make my own decisions." He dropped the case in a pocket of his blouse and sealed the flap.

She let out a long breath. Muscle by muscle she relaxed. The smile she gave him was slow and warm. "You're toughening fast, I see," she murmured.

He flushed. "Have to, I suppose." With returning unease he noticed how the driver watched them in his rearview. Why had Vee not wanted him blocked off —?

THE call phone told Koskinen why, two minutes later. "Attention all vehicles! Attention all vehicles! A criminal is at large, foreign agent badly wanted by the Federal Bureau of Military Security. He may be riding in a public or private—"

Vivienne's gun was already out of her coverall and aimed at the driver's head. "Not a move, asco," she ordered. "Don't let your hands go anywhere near that transmission switch."

"—considered extremely dangerous," the crisp voice said. In the screen Koskinen saw his own face, from the tape that had been made during his second call. "If you see this person, you are required by the National Defense Act to—"

"What, what's going on?" the driver stuttered. "What do you want?"

"You won't get hurt if you cooperate," Vivienne said.

"Look, I got a wife and kids. I —please—"

Koskinen glanced out the window and down. At this speed, the densest part of town had been left behind. The land was still dominated by roofs, but they belonged to relatively small buildings and traffic was light.

"You can't get nowhere in this car," the driver said frantically. "Not in any car. If they want you that bad, Control'll take everything past the police checkpoints."

"That's a rather extreme action," Koskinen said. "I should think it'd tie up traffic from now till sunset."

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Vivienne threw him a bleak glance. "This is a rather extreme case, Pete. I think he's right. We'd better get out of this hack while we can."

"But—I mean, how—"

"I don't know, I don't know. . . . Wait. Yes! Stop at that playground yonder."

They slanted down, went off Control, touched an old and cracked street, and halted at the curb. The playground stretched vacant and the houses opposite—peak-roofed, narrow-windowed, with peeling stucco fronts, obviously prewar survivals—hardly showed more life at this hour. Vivienne opaqued the windows and suggested Koskinen bind and gag the driver.

"I'll use my own clothes," Koskinen said, "and wear his."

"Good idea. You *are* becoming a fine outlaw." She watched with frank, disconcerting interest while he swapped garments. But there wasn't really time for embarrassment. Having secured the prisoner, he went out, opened the rear hood, yanked some wires and unbolted some fuel system parts.

"This car isn't going anywhere now," he told her. "I've sabotaged the phone too."

"Excellent. How'd you know, though?"

"I studied machinery at the Institute, same as you. But mainly, uh, on Mars, learning to see things in something like the Martian way, I got a . . . I don't know what the English word would be, if there is any. A sense of rightness. Of how things must be in order to work."

"Good. You'll need some such ability if—Oh, oh. Man coming."

A BURLY person in mechanic's garb slouched along the street, stopped and said, "Trouble, bud? Maybe I can help."

"Thanks," Koskinen said, "but the company wants me to report direct in case of breakdowns. Also, my fare has to get on her way. Where's the nearest tube?"

The mechanic regarded him sharply. "No tubes this far out."

"Oh." Koskinen laughed. "I'm fresh from Los Angeles. Still feeling my way around. Where's a monorail station?"

"I'm headed there myself."

Koskinen was pleased at how readily he answered questions about the west coast, where he had never been either. It took the mechanic's mind off Vivienne, incongruously dressed to be hiring a taxi, and off the generator. The man couldn't afford to travel, with wages as low as they were, "thanks to them goddam machines. I'm lucky to have a job at all. If that there Antarctic colony had only worked out the way they talked about, I'd've gone like a shot. Chance to be my own boss again."

"Expensive, though, isn't it?"

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"Yeah. That's the catch. Need shelter against the cold. That costs money. So only the big companies or the government can build. So nobody can go who's not on their payroll, and everybody has to live cheek by jowl because one big shelter costs less than a lotta little ones. I decided I might as well stay here."

Too bad, Koskinen thought. *Americans were free men once.*

Luckily there were no taxis at the station—if this poor decayed suburb rated any such service—so there was nothing suspicious in Vivienne not taking one. The mechanic boarded the train which had just come in. The woman said she needed the next one. But as the train got started, she led Koskinen in a run and mounted a car further down.

"This is aimed our way, all right," she panted, "but we don't want our friend to know that. He'll see a public bulletin sometime today for sure."

Koskinen nodded. They took a seat. There were only a few sleepy, drably clad fellow passengers, and he doubted if the coach was ever filled. Employment had dropped far below transportation capacity.

You know, he thought, *with cheap modern power tools, small machines—and, yes, the hydroponics, algal, and bioreclamation techniques developed for spaceships—a family could be almost self-sufficient. Home industries could revive, not so much competing with the great automatic factories as ignoring them. And that, in time, would force the economy as a whole to use automation rationally. . . . If big business, big labor, big government would sit still for such a development. I'm afraid, though, they'd clamp down on it, using zoning laws or taxes or something as a blind, but actually fearing that a nation of independent men would bring the end of their power. . . . My! I seem to've gotten cynical at the same astounding rate Vee thinks I've gotten tough. But damn it, I can* sense *the wrongness in society today, as clearly as I could sense it in a badly designed engine.*

THAT reminded him. "Where are we going now?" he asked low.

"It's a pretty wild idea, and you may think we'd do better to double back to the slums," she answered. "But I thought . . . that place upstate I told you about . . . we could at least catch our breath there, and phone for help, maybe to the Brazilian friends I've still got or—Anyway, we wouldn't simply be running."

"Sounds good to me. But how can we get there? Control can stop anything we'd likely be able to hire or steal."

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"Yes. Except—" She stared out the window. The suburb was giving way to open fields, where dew flashed in the young sunlight.

"The World War One Centennial Commission has built a lot of replica machines," she said. "They're for re-enacting battles as the appropriate dates roll around. You know, 3D spectacle, keep the masses sodden and docile—but the planes and guns and ground cars are honest working reproductions. Between assignments they're occasionally used in advertising stunts, or as a demonstration for history classes, or what have you. Well, a batch of airplanes are kept right in this area."

"Huh?"

"They haven't any autopilots; so they can run about freely. That's no traffic hazard: as slow as they are, anybody's radar can spot 'em in ample time to dodge, and Control routinely compensates for bigger swerves than that. What matters to us is that the police can't take over a vehicle from a distance that doesn't have an autopilot. Also, no one except the field super pays much attention to where those planes go. They don't file flight plans or any such thing."

"My God." Koskinen pulled his jaw back into place.

"Zigger and I visited out there one day last year. I know the layout. I think we can steal one and the theft won't be noticed for days. I could be wrong, of course. What do you say?"

He realized that she had made a final surrender of leadership to him. It was as heavy a burden as the unit lying on the bench beside them. He gulped and said, "Sure. We'll try."

THE planes were stored three miles from the nearest train stop. Koskinen and Vivienne walked there, after buying breakfast and two lengths of rope at the supermarket, as well as some pills to compensate for sleeplessness. Most of the way they followed a straight, rather narrow, crumbling street lined with the mean houses of a moribund village. Trucks, occasional cars, go-carts with bubble canopies, whirred past them. But there weren't many other pedestrians —chiefly women, though some unemployed and sullen men—and nobody paid the strangers much attention. One man pointed where to turn, baffled that anyone went to the hangar on foot but too apathetic to ask why. The side street petered out in an asphalt lane which crossed an enormous stretch of vacant lot.

"Ugh," said Vivienne. "Weeds and brambles—where homes stood once, before the fire storm —It gives me the crawls."

"Eh?" Koskinen blinked at

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her. The grasses rippled silvery green. Somewhere a bird was singing. Instead of dust he smelled moist earth. "But this is lovely."

"Ah, well." She squeezed his arm. "You're sweet to say so."

The hangar and airstrip stood in the middle of the field, surrounded by a twelve-foot electrified fence. Radar alarms would alert the police if anyone tried to land an unauthorized aircar here. So a watchman wasn't needed, and there wasn't any activity scheduled today. Koskinen looked around with care, seeing nobody outside the nearest houses, many yards distant, and got busy.

He made a noose in one rope and, after several tries, threw it around the top of a fencepost. "Okay, Vee," he said, and helped her don the shield generator. She turned it on. He used the second rope to lash himself to the outside of the potential barrier, and passed the lariat's end through a loop in that harness. Awkwardly, then, he shoved her against the fence and pulled them both up hand over hand, the invisible shell between him and the charged mesh. He sweated to think what would happen if he touched it. At the top he hung on one-handed while he knotted lasso and harness together. Taking the lasso's end in his teeth, he untied himself and crawled over the shell until he could leap. He fell clear of the fence. The impact jarred him more than he had expected; you landed easier on Mars. When he had his breath back, he hauled on the lariat until Vivienne in her force-cocoon tilted over the top of the wires and hung on the inside. Then he swayed back and forth like a bell-ringer, until she was bumping the fence and rebounding through a long arc. At the far end of one such swing she cut off the field and fell clear of the harness. Nevertheless she landed so close to the fence that his heart stopped for a moment.

She picked herself up. "Okay, we're in." Actual laughter sounded beneath the wind. "Koskinen and Cordeiro, Cat Burglars by Appointment to His Majesty Tybalt I, King of the Cats. C'mon, let's swipe us some transportation."

THEY crossed more weeds and the tarmac strip to the hangar. Vivienne would have shot out the lock, but the door opened for them as they neared. The space within was huge and dusky. Koskinen gaped about at the machines. Somehow they made him feel he had wandered into a more ancient past then even the towers on Mars. *You see,* he told himself, *this is my past. My great-grandfather must have ridden in a car like these.*

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This is my planet. Anger gathered in him. *I don't like what they have done to her.*

He suppressed emotion and got to work. In an hour he had chosen his vehicle—a De Havilland 4 day bomber, it was called on its nameplate, a big two-winged machine, two open cockpits, less dash than the Spads or Fokkers but a certain honest homeliness that pleased him—and deduced, with the help of an operator's manual, how to fly it. They rolled it out onto the strip, fueled it from a pump, and turned off the radar alarms.

"Take the rear seat and use the auxiliary controls to start 'er," he told Vivienne. "I'll crank the propeller."

She regarded him with a sudden intensity. "We might crash, or get shot down, or anything, you know," she said.

"Yes." He shrugged. "That's been understood right along."

"I—" She took his hands. "I want you to know something. In case I don't get another chance to tell you."

He looked into the brown eyes and waited.

"That detonator," she said. "I was bluffing."

"What?"

"Or, I should say, the detonator works but the bomb doesn't." Her laugh caught in her throat. "When Zigger told me to make that thing for you . . . we'd been talking half the night, you and I, remember? . . . I couldn't do it. There's no explosive in that capsule. Only talcum powder."

"What?" he whispered again.

"I wanted you to know, Pete."

She tried to withdraw her hands, but he caught them and wouldn't let go. "That's the truth, Vee?"

"Yes. Why should you doubt me, now?"

"I don't," he said. He rallied his entire courage, drew the detonator from his pocket, and snicked off the safety. She watched him through tears. He pressed the button.

With a whoop, he tossed the object into the weeds, kissed her with inexpert violence, stammered something about her being his crewmate and Sharer-of-Hopes and much else, kissed her again, and lifted her bodily to the rear cockpit. She nestled among the machine guns there and took the stick in a dazed fashion. He swung the heavy wooden propeller down with more strength than he had known he had.

THE engine coughed to life. Exhaust fumes grew pungent in his nose. He sprang onto the lower wing and thence to the front seat. Vivienne relinquished her own controls. Koskinen spent a minute listening to the engine and feeling the many vibrations.

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It sensed right to him. He taxied forward, accelerating. The plane left earth with a joyous little jump unlike anything he had ever felt before.

Vivienne had shown him their destination on a map. He found he could follow the landmarks without much trouble, at this leisurely pace. Elkor's training of nerves and muscles made piloting simple after the first few minutes.

The airplane was a roaring, shuddering, odorous, cranky thing to fly. But fun. He had never been so intimate with the air. It howled around his windshield, lashed his face, thrummed in the struts, sang in the wires, and bucked against the control surfaces. Ridiculous, he thought, that he should draw so much life and hope from a primitive machine, or even from learning that the woman with him had never been willing to help with his murder. But that was the way he felt. And the landscape below had grown altogether fresh, open, fair; this was a wealthy district, where houses were big and far between, separated by woods and parklands. The Hudson gleamed between hills that were dazzling green under a blue sky and scudding white clouds. There must be an answer to his dilemma—in such a world!

There was. He saw it with wonder. After a very long while he looked upward. *"Dream well, Elkor,"* he called.

ZIGGER'S retreat overlooked the river, which ran like fire beneath the westering sun. Steep forested slopes rose from the opposite shore. On this side, the view off the terrace was of lawns and rosebeds that sloped down to the water. Koskinen had spent much time there today, seeking oneness with the land. Oak leaves rustled above him, an apple tree stood heavy with fruit, a fir sighed in the breeze, a thrush whistled. He had stood bewitched by the million scents.

But "now" is an infinitesimal. Toward evening he could no longer maintain joy.

Why not? he asked himself. *We still have peace.*

We won't much longer.

We'll have it again, or be dead.

Can't say I want to be dead.

The caretaker couple had been predictably flurried when the DH 4 landed, its rear skid plowing up the golf course in lieu of the wheel brakes it didn't have. They recognized Vivienne and opened the house for her, but with dubious looks. It would have been difficult to imprison them, so she sent them off to their cottage, explaining that she wanted privacy. No doubt the old man would flit to the local village, or the wife would phone some acquaintance, and gossip about them

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there carryings on at Mr. Van Velt's place. But the word wouldn't get back to MS any faster than Marcus' people could follow the clues pointing in this direction. Or so Koskinen assumed. His enemy was efficient.

Doubts assailed him. His hopes were tenuous, after all, based on little more than a feeling of how cause and effect ought to develop in a rational world; and surely this world was anything but rational. Might it not be best to flee on?

No. Probably not. Sooner or later, you had to make a stand. So the showdown wouldn't be long delayed. Koskinen drew another breath of Earth's air.

Vivienne emerged through the French doors. "Whew!" she said. "I'm hoarse as a frog and my fingertips are raw from button punching. Spell me again, huh?"

"Sure," he said.

"I'll rustle up some supper meanwhile."

"Eh? You mean heat a package?"

"I do not. I mean an old-fashioned individually prepared supper, using my own hands and brain. I really am a fair cook." The forced lightness left her tone. She came to stand beside him. "We won't have many more chances."

"Maybe not," he admitted.

She laid an arm about his waist and her head on his shoulder. "I wish I could do something more for you, Pete, than just make you a meal."

"Why?" His face turned hot. He stared fixedly across the river.

"I owe you so much."

"No. No, you saved me—bailed me out of the Crater—and that was little, really, compared to . . . that business of the locket." He touched the chain. "I don't think I ever want this taken off."

"Does it mean that much to you, Pete? Really?"

"Yes. Because you see . . . you suddenly became someone, the only one on Earth besides my shipmates, who're in jail or dead . . . someone I belonged with. I can't ever repay you that."

"You know," she whispered, "that's pretty much the way I feel about you."

SUDDENLY she pulled free of him and ran back into the house. He heard her start crying, and wondered why, and more than anything else he wanted to go after her and help her if he could.

Grimness clenched within him. *Not much time left.* He went into the living room. Threading his way among luxurious furniture, he reached the phone. Every call he made was another blow at the enemy.

The note pad showed him that Vivienne, on her latest stint, had covered half a dozen numbers in

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Calcutta. The Americas and Europe were already taken care of, however sketchily. Koskinen reflected upon his school geography. Where next? Bombay? New Delhi? No, better some other countries first, and then come back to India if he could. The idea was to scatter the information as widely as possible.

He couldn't quite bring himself to inform China directly. The average Chinese was a decent, kindly man . . . of course . . . the average anybody was. But the current government of China —Okay, the Chinese would find out eventually from someone else. Koskinen punched for the operator. "English-language Tokyo directory," he said.

With a helpfully inhuman lack of curiosity, the robot flashed a page onto his screen. Koskinen turned the reel knob until he came to the listing for Engineers. He copied down several home and office numbers at random, cleared the board, and punched the first number, adding the *RX* which internationally directed the receiving instrument to record. A flat Oriental face looked out at him, puzzled. This job was easier when no one was home.

"I am Peter Koskinen," he rattled for the -?-th time. He offered a mechanical smile. "News service will confirm for you that I have lately returned from Mars with the *Franz Boas* expedition. I have brought with me a device which confers virtual personal invulnerability. To prevent its suppression, I am broadcasting the physical principles, engineering specifications, and operating instructions on a worldwide basis."

The Japanese got a word in edgewise, doubtless to the effect that he didn't speak English and this was some mistake. Koskinen held the first sheet of his treatise up to him, then the next and the next, as fast as he was able. A few people had switched off, but this man watched with growing interest. Koskinen felt sure he'd take his tape to someone who could read a playback frame by frame. And if only a fraction of the many who had been called would try the gadget out, word would get around—unstoppably.

KOSKINEN finished, said goodbye, and started on the next number. Vivienne's shout interrupted him. He cursed and dashed back onto the terrace. She poised there, bowstring taut, pointing into the sky. Four long black aircars whistled down the evening sunbeams. He thought already he could pick out the Military Security emblem on their flanks.

"I saw them from the kitchen window," she said. Her voice wavered. "So soon?"

"We must have left a clearer

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trail for them than I hoped."

"But—" She caught his hand in cold fingers and struggled not to cry again.

"What's wrong, Veevee?" He laid his other hand below her chin and tilted her face toward his. "Aren't you glad we can start hitting back?"

"If . . . if we really can—I thought we'd have some time together. The two of us."

"Yes," he said, "that would have been nice."

She stiffened her shoulders. "I'm sorry. Don't mind me."

He forgot shyness and kissed her lightly on the lips. Her response was explosive. They returned to the living room. Vivienne took over the phone: one last number, a man's surprised face springing into the screen and a rush of Portuguese from her. Koskinen picked up the screen generator, ready to turn it on if there was an attack from the air. But nothing happened immediately.

Vivienne finished, waved goodbye to the man in Brazil and switched off. She and Koskinen hurried out onto the rear patio. It was a wide flagstoned area surrounded by willows and roses, the clear view making it a better place for a stand than the house. Koskinen had heaped food packages and miscellaneous containers of water in the middle, near a large ornamental fountain which was not turned off. He had also taken a rifle from Zigger's gun cabinet, a radio talkie, bedding, and such-like necessities. The heap was surrounded by a crude hut—four tall pieces of sheet metal tacked to light wooden frames, a fifth piece laid on top as a roof.

A car hovered low overhead. The others must have landed, for a couple of men came around the house as Koskinen emerged. They wore plain clothes, but they carried pistols and ran in the crouched zigzag of soldiers.

Koskinen laid the generator on the ground and flipped the switch. He had adjusted it so the barrier shell enclosed a cylindroid about fifteen feet in diameter and seven feet high. The fountain made a loud crack as the field, expanding from zero to finite thickness, sheared its base in two. The potential field was also a good cutting tool. The great stone bowl, several tons in mass, fell onto the rubbery floor of the barrier, near the sheet metal shack, and lay still.

"Okay," Koskinen said. "We're safe now, Veevee."

She crept into his arms, buried her face against his breast and trembled. He became so engrossed with soothing her that he stopped noticing the agents who surrounded them. He had looked forward to some comic relief when they tried to break in,

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but by the time Vivienne was seated and smoking a cigaret with some return of coolness, the siege had settled down. Two dozen hard young men ringed the patio with weapons.

KOSKINEN walked to the invisible wall and tapped his talkie. A man nodded and called something. Koskinen was not unduly surprised when Hugh Marcus came from the house with a transceiver in his own hand.

They confronted each other, a yard apart, an uncrossable few centimeters raised between. Marcus smiled. "Hello, there, Pete," he said.

Coldness surged up: "Mr. Koskinen to you."

"Now you're being childish," Marcus said. "This whole escapade has been so fantastic, in fact, that I can only guess you've gone psycho." Gently again: "Come on out and let us cure you. For your own sake. Please."

"Cure me of my memory Or my life?"

"How melodramatic do you think—"

"Where's Dave Abrams?"

"He—"

"Bring my shipmates here," Koskinen said. "You admit you have several of them, if not all. Have them stand immediately outside this barrier. I'll readjust it to include them. If they, then, tell me you've only kept them for their own protection, I'll come out and beg your humble pardon. Otherwise I'll stay put till the sun freezes."

Marcus reddened. "Do you know what you're doing? You're setting yourself against the government of the United States."

"Oh? How? Perhaps I am guilty of resisting arrest, but I remember the Constitutional definition of treason too well to think I've committed that. Let's take the case to court. My lawyer will argue that the arrest was wrongful. Because you know I haven't done anything to rate it."

"Why, your misappropriation of government property."

"Uh-uh." Koskinen shook his head. "I'm prepared to turn this gadget over to the proper authority at any time. The Astronautical Authority, that is. The articles of the expedition said in plain language—"

Marcus' forefinger stabbed. "Treason, yes!" he shouted. "You're withholding something vital to the security of the United States."

"Has Congress passed a law regulating the use of potential barrier fields? Has there even been a Presidential proclamation? Sorry, chum. The articles I signed never said a word about secrecy. Contrariwise. We were expected to publish our findings."

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Marcus stood silent a space, then threw back his head and stated flatly: "I've got better things to do than argue with an incompetent amateur lawyer. You're under arrest. If you continue to resist, we'll burn you out."

"Have fun," said Koskinen. He walked back to the middle of his fortress. The figures outside ran here and there, and presently three of them returned carrying maser guns.

"So they deduced that," Vivienne said on a note like terror.

"Sure. I told you they would. They're not stupid, much." Koskinen slipped into the metal shack with her. He closed the last gap and they sat down on the supply pile.

SUNLIGHT filtered through the cracks, touching her hair with a crow's wing sheen. His heart thudded as he looked at her. The metal warmed somewhat but soon reached equilibrium. They held hands. Koskinen waited till the walls had cooled again before he opened a crack to peer out. He didn't see any masers.

"I'll parley if it amuses you," he said with his talkie, "but on condition you keep those silly heat rays elsewhere."

"All right," Marcus said furiously.

"My partner will stay in the shelter, in case you do try sniping," Koskinen warned. "She's as stubborn about this business as me." Not without trepidation, he emerged and went toward Marcus.

The chief looked almost bemused. He ran a hand through his gray hair. "What's your game, Koskinen? What do you want?"

"First, my friends released."

"But they wouldn't be safe!"

"Stop lying. Since you haven't produced them yet, I know why they're being held and I can make a pretty good guess how most of them have been interrogated. My second point would make them perfectly safe anyhow, since there'd be no more reason to snatch them. I want the potential barrier information made public."

"What!" Marcus looked genuinely aghast, so much so that the agents near him stepped closer. He waved them back and stared at Koskinen. Long gold-colored light fell across both men and glowed on the leaves behind.

"You're crazy," Marcus said. "You don't know what it'd mean."

"Tell me," Koskinen invited.

"Why, every crook would be immune to the police—"

"Wouldn't every honest citizen be immune to the crook? Let this thing be refined further, let it be engineered into a pocket-size gadget which lets you move about

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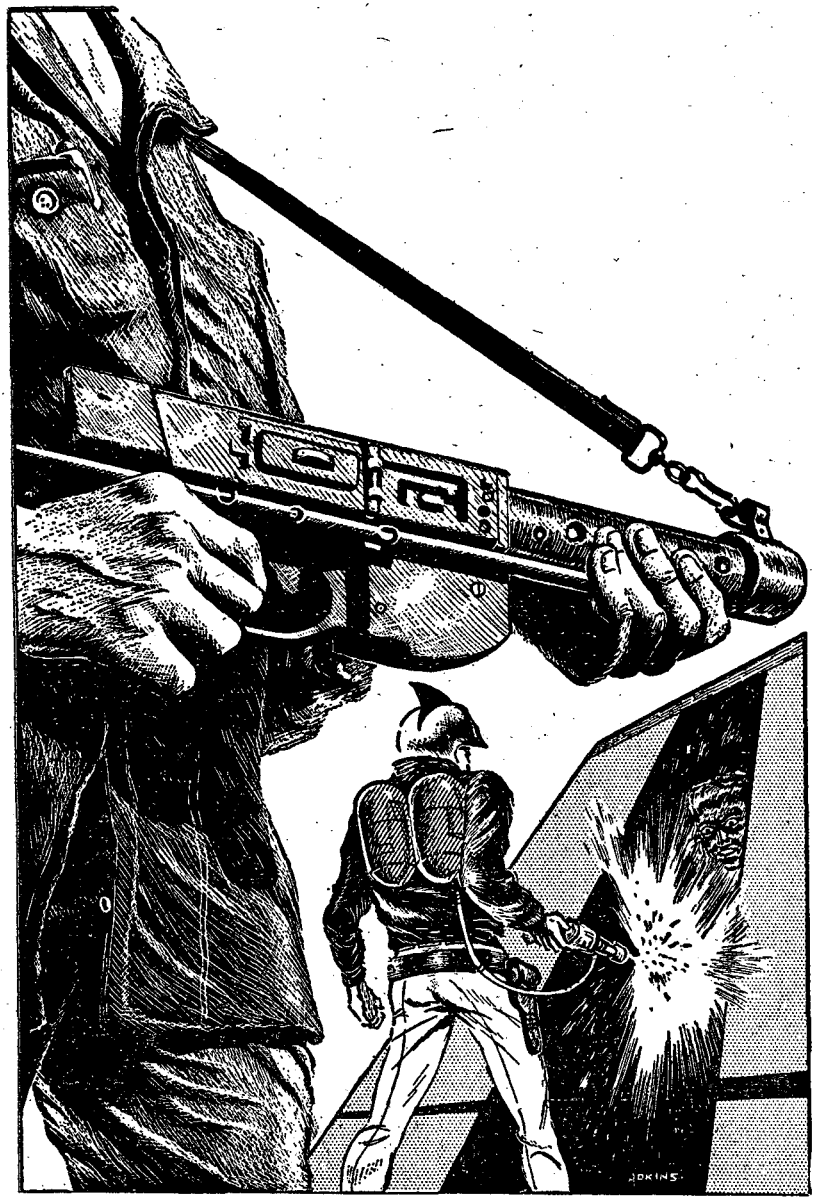

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freely while the screen is up, and I'd guess there'd be a nearly complete end to personal violence. Even its present clumsy shape, the unit lets you go into dangerous places unarmed."

"Maybe so. But I'll tell you what else it would end." Marcus thrust out his jaw. "The Protectorate. Do you want the atomic wars back?"

"The Protectorate won't be needed any more."

"Can this thing withstand an atomic bomb?"

"N-no. Not a direct hit or a near miss. But you don't get many people that way anyhow in a war. You get them through fallout, epidemics, and chaos, against which this does make the common man safe."

"There are a billion Chinese, Koskinen. A billion—can you understand that number. We sit on the lid only because we could destroy them faster than they could charge us. If our weapons were useless against them—"

"Why, then you'd simply turn on your own barrier field. You won't see hordes marching across Bering Straits one winter, or sailing across the Pacific, if that's what you're afraid of. They'd be too easy to stop . . . without any shooting, even. A big potential barrier, with the generator anchored to bedrock, would do it." Koskinen saw Marcus' face change. Could the idea possibly be getting across? Hope flared in him. "Look," he said, "you're missing the essential point. Not only is war going to become impractical, it isn't even going to be tried. You need a stern government and a regimented populace to organize modern war. And how long do you think any government can last that isn't popular. . . easygoing . . . when any citizen can tell his masters to go take a running dive into hell? Don't worry about Wang's dictatorship. Six months from now Wang'll be cowering inside his own barrier field with a mob waiting to starve him out!"

MARCUS leaned forward. "Do you realize the same thing could happen here?" he asked most softly.

"Sure," Koskinen said. "And long overdue."

"Do you want anarchy, then?"

"No. Only freedom. Limited government and individual independence. Wasn't that always the American ideal? There may be some upheaval here and there as society readjusts, but I'd call that a small price for a return to Jefferson's principles. 'The tree of liberty must be watered from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants'—remember? And in this case I don't expect any blood would be shed except the tyrants'."

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Koskinen lowered his voice, which had rung out with the old brave words. "I know you hate to see your job made obsolete," he said. "A job you believe in. But you'll have plenty to do, helping the transition along. You'll have more fun, even, in a world that's begun bubbling again, instead of this surly garrison state. Let's be friends, shall we?"

The director stood motionless. A breeze ruffled his hair, and Koskinen wished he too could feel Earth's air moving over him. The sun slipped low.

Marcus raised his eyes and rasped, "This has gone far enough. If you don't surrender at once, you'll be in real trouble."

Koskinen tried to answer, but couldn't. He swallowed grief and anger, snapped off his transmission, and went back to Vivienne.

"No go?" she asked. A glow globe lit the metal shack, where darkness had already entered. She knelt by some packages she was opening. He shook his head and sat down. Weariness began to drag at him.

"Come on, eat," she urged. "I'm afraid it isn't the supper I promised you, though. I'll give you a rain check on that."

"I'd like to see rain again," he sighed.

She stopped what she was doing. "Don't you expect to?"

"Oh, I have hopes. Hope is all we've got to go on." He leaned back against the supply pile and stared at his hands.

Vivienne finished her work and made him eat something. "Now lie down for a while," she said. He didn't resist, but laid his head on her lap. Sleep came like a blow.

SHE shook him awake. "Uh," he said, struggling through many thick layers. "Oh . . . ugh . . . Yeh. You wanna rest?" He knuckled his eyes. The lids felt gritty. "Damn me. I should'a let you sleep first."

"That's not the trouble," she said. Her face was intent in the glowlight. "They've brought machinery."

"Oh." Koskinen stuck his head out the shelter. Floodlamps had been erected, hiding the night in glare. A movable crane loomed dinosaurian over the barrier. Its treads had ripped the turf to pieces. Laborers accompanied it.

Koskinen looked at his watch. "Quarter to five," he said. "Took 'em quite a while to fetch it here, eh?"

"But what will they do?"

"Didn't I explain this possibility? Thanks to that broken fountain, we weigh too much to be carried off by hand. They figure to lift us by that gadget instead. Probably put us on a stratoship and take us someplace more convenient for them."

"But Pete—" She leaned

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against him. He laid an arm around her waist. After a minute he sensed the fear draining from her. "You don't seem worried," she said.

"Lord, no," he laughed.

The hook came down. Chains were attached, harnessing the invisible shell. A foreman waved his crew back. The crane arm began slowly rising.

"Okay," Koskinen said. "Class dismissed." He hunkered down by the generator and turned the adjustment knob.

The barrier field expanded a foot, irresistibly. Chains broke in pieces and whipped across the yard. The crane swayed. Koskinen retracted the field. "I think I could knock that machine over by extending our roof upward," he said, "but why risk hurting the operator?"

"You know something?" Vivienne said shakily. "You're wonderful."

He blushed.

The confusion outside settled down again. The workers left with their crane; the agents resumed guardian positions outside the circle of floodlighting. Marcus stepped into it, alone.

"Koskinen," he spoke into the talkie.

"Yes?" Koskinen stayed where he was.

"Pretty good trick, that. Do you plan to keep on resisting?"

"Yes."

Marcus sighed. "You leave me no choice. I hate to do this but if you don't come out, I'll have to use an atomic bomb."

KOSKINEN heard Vivienne's gasp. Her nails dug into his wrist. "You can't," he snarled. "Not without a Presidential order. I know that much law."

"How do you know I don't have an order?"

Koskinen passed a dry tongue across his lips. "Listen," he said, "if you can get the President to okay such a thing, you can a lot easier get him to come here and give me his personal assurance you aren't trying to grab all the power there is before the power you've got slips away from you. If he'll do that, I'll come out."

"You'll come out when you're told, Koskinen. This minute."

"In other words, you don't have any Presidential authorization and you know you can't get it. Now who's breaking the law?"

"Military Security has the legal right to use the nuclear weapons in its arsenals, on its own initiative, in case of dire national emergency."

"What's so dire about us? We're only sitting here."

Marcus looked at his watch. "Quarter past five," he said. "You have two hours to surrender." He walked quickly, stiff-legged, from the light.

"Pete." Vivienne shuddered

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against Koskinen. "He's bluffing, isn't he? He can't. Not for real."

"I'm afraid he can," Koskinen said.

"But how can he explain it afterward?"

"Trump up some story or other. There won't be any evidence left, you know. Plenty of fireball atoms travel fast enough to penetrate this shield, not to mention radiant heat. Obviously his men here are a hand-picked core, loyal to him rather than to the Constitution. Every would-be dictator recruits such a gang, according to all the sociology I ever studied. So they'll support his yarn. Sure, he can get away with it."

"But he'll lose the generator too!"

"That's better than losing his position, and his chance for a still higher position. Besides, he must figure that his tame scientists now have clues which'll let them work out the secret in time."

"Pete, there isn't any secret! We took care of that. Why haven't you told him?"

"Because I was afraid, I still am, that he'd fire that bomb at once. We, right here, with a working potential barrier machine, we're the only immediate proof that he's a liar and traitor who's outlived his day. No one can make a unit overnight, you realize. It's an intricate thing, calling for some special materials. The first handmade prototypes can't be ready for days at best. If he acts fast, knowing the situation, Marcus' gang still has a chance to hunt down the people who're trying to build the things, and brand everything as an anti-Protectorate conspiracy. But that's provided the rest of the government believes him and backs him. Which they won't as long as we're able to testify."

"I see," she said. After a moment, for no reason he could guess, she switched off the glow globe. The blaze outside was softened as it diffused through cracks in the metal shelter, until it touched her with highlights and embracing shadows. "We can only wait, then," she said.

MAYBE your Brazilian friend, the one to whom you told the whole story to, maybe he'll be able to get action."

"Maybe. He's had to go through a lot of bureaucratic channels—in the middle of the night—if he's accomplished anything so far. And his own government has him on the 'suspicious' list because he knew Johnny and me. Still, he is a journalist; his breed do know more ropes than the rest of us."

"How about that Senator you mentioned? The one you said was a libertarian."

"Hohenrieder? Yes, I contacted him too, as well as sending him a set of plans. But I didn't

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talk to him, of course. A secretary, who looked skeptical as hell. Maybe he wiped the tape at once. Hohenrieder's office must get a lot of crank calls."

"Still, maybe the guy did pass this one on to his boss. So there's your Brazilian journalist certainly trying to tell the President of the U.S. what's going on, and Senator Hohenrieder possibly trying, and maybe a few of the others, who've simply gotten our standard message, have put two and two together and are also trying. They may succeed at any minute."

"Cut out that fake cheerfulness, darling," she said. "I'm perfectly well able to face the fact that they probably won't. Not before 0715, anyhow. Marcus may be in jail by noon; but we'll never know."

"Maybe not," he admitted reluctantly. After a second: "It won't hurt. You won't feel a thing."

"I know. In a way, that scares me worst."

"Do you want to go out to them?" he asked. "I can switch off the barrier for a second and you can run out."

"Lord, no!" Her vehemence put life back in them both. She laughed unsteadily and groped for a cigaret. Then she smiled and nestled beside him. They held hands. Afterward he remembered that the talking had been mostly his, about what they would do in their future together.

THE first sunlight tinged the sky. They went outside to watch, careless of heat ray snipers, looking past the guards who still stood in shadow, even past the ugly long cylinder that had been wheeled on a cart next to the barrier field.

"Sunrise," Koskinen said, "trees, birdsong, the river, but mostly you. I'm glad I came back to Earth."

She didn't reply. He could not keep from looking at his watch. The time was 0647.

A bullet spray chewed holes in the house wall. Koskinen jumped. The Security car which had been hovering on guard sped away. A gleaming needle swept after it. Guns tongued fire. The car staggered and fell downward. Koskinen didn't see it strike, but smoke puffed up above the trees.

The slender craft returned. "That's Air Force!" Vivienne screamed. "The insignia, see, Air Force—"

A man in uniform came running and dodging through the rosebushes. An MS agent dropped to one knee and shot at him with a submachine gun. The soldier hit dirt just beneath the bullet stream. His arm chopped through an arc. Koskinen saw the grenade coming. Instinctively, he thrust Vivienne behind him. Not even

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sound penetrated the barrier. But at least, he realized with nausea, he had spared her a view of the agent's death. The others scattered from sight.

No—one man pelted over the torn grass. Marcus! His face was twisted out of humanness; slaver ran from his mouth. He reached the bomb and fumbled with the nose. A soldier dashed from behind a willow tree and fired. Marcus went on his belly. The soldier approached, turned him over, shook a helmeted head and looked warily around. Marcus' dead eyes glared at the rising sun.

There was no more fighting that Koskinen saw. He held Vivienne close, wondering why she wept. An Army platoon deployed around the potential shell. He read nothing on their young faces except amazement.

A grizzled man led three or four junior officers and a couple of civilians around the house and onto the patio. Four stars gleamed on his shoulders. "Koskinen?" he said into the talkie at his throat. He stopped, peering uncertainly at the two behind the barrier.

"Yes?" Koskinen remembered to switch on his own transmitter. "Hello?"

"I'm General Grahovitch. Regular Army—" a contemptuous look at Marcus' corpse—"Special Operations office. Here by Presidential command. When we landed to investigate what was going on, these birds opened fire. What the devil *is* the situation?"

"I'll explain," said Koskinen. "One minute. One minute, please." He unwrapped Vivienne's arms from around his neck, dashed into the shelter and turned off the generator. As he came out, the dawn wind blew across him.

HE had a moment alone with her in the living room, by grace of General Grahovitch, before they embarked for Washington. As he entered, he saw her at the window, staring out across the lawn to the river and the hills beyond.

"Veevee," he said.

She didn't turn around. He came behind her, laid his hands on her waist and said into her ear, with the blue-black hair tickling his lips and smelling like summer, "Everything's settled. All over but the shouting."

Still she didn't move.

"Of course," he said, "the shouting's apt to last quite a while. I'm told that half the government thinks I ought to be hanged for scattering the plans around so widely. But the other half sees that we really had very little choice, so the only thing to do is make public heroes of us and so on. I can't say I relish that prospect, but we should be

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able to sneak off eventually."

"That's good," she said in a flat voice.

He kissed her cheek. "And then—" he said shyly.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I don't doubt you'll have a wonderful time."

"What do you mean, me? I'm thinking about us." He grew aware of the tension under his hands. "Hey, you aren't worried about those old charges, are you? I have Grahovitch's personal word that you'll get not just a pardon, but a national apology."

"It was good of you to remember about me, in the middle of everything else," she said. Slowly, forcing herself, she turned about to meet his gaze. "I'm not surprised, though. You're that kind of guy."

"Nuts," he blustered. "Got to take care of my own wife, don't I?—Uh—" He saw with uncomprehending shock that she was not crying simply because she had wept herself dry.

"I'll miss you like hell, Pete," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't think I'd tie a man like you . . . to somebody like me . . . do you? I haven't sunk that far."

"What do you mean, sunk? Don't you want me?"

"Oh, Pete, Pete." She took his head between her hands. "Can't you see? It's the other way around. After everything I've done and been—"

"Do you think that matters to me?"

"—everything I still am; because habits don't go away just by my wishing they would—Yes, it does matter. Not now; you're still too young to understand. But later it would. As the years passed. As you came to know me better, and know other people better too, and started realizing —No, I can't do that to you. Or to myself, even. Let's say a clean goodbye."

"But what will you do?" he asked, stunned into stupidity, seeing only afterward that the one rational thing would perhaps have been to prevent her by force from departing.

"I'll manage," she said. "My kind always does. I'll disappear —I know how to do that very thoroughly—and get a new face somewhere, and find something to keep me busy. Remember, darling, you've known me less than a week. In six months you'll have trouble recalling what I looked like. I know."

She kissed him, a hasty gesture, as if she were afraid. "But next to Johnny," she said, "I liked you the best."

Before he could stir, she was out the door, walking down toward the riverside where several Army aircars waited. Her head was held high. **THE END**

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YOU are thinking at this very moment. But where do you feel this thinking is taking place? Is it in the front of your head or the back? Ah, somewhere just back of the eyes, you say, and a little above them. Don't tell me your thinking seems to occur in a sinus passage! No, close your eyes and it won't seem to focus so much in that unlikely area. Now there isn't any focus at all? Just all over the inside of your head, whatever that means, and even a little in your arm or your heart or whatever spot you happen to concentrate on.

Any spot you happen to concentrate on!

The stream of ideas came to a dead halt right there and Benson walked around the final thought as if absorption of it back into his mind, turning it over and over there, might mean overturning the whole world outside. What a crazy, useless mess to be concocting when humanity already was topsy-turvy, teetering on collapse, and waiting for its best minds to find an answer, any answer, to its real problem.

So he stopped walking around the idea and waited until it faded, leaving behind only a vacuum. Then the horrible truth rose once more in its place.

"Your coffee, sir?" Hubert had slipped so quietly into the library that Benson had not heard the slightest clink of metal or crackle of electronic circuits. The butler was leaning slightly forward now, ready to set the silver service down on the end table next to his master's easy chair. "You did not ring, sir, but you always have coffee at four."

"Thank you, Hubert." He looked intently into the robot's

An ingenious re-examination of the Laws of Robotics, involving a new way for robots to kill people and a new way for people to kill robots.

the THINKING DISEASE

By ALBERT TEICHNER

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Illustrator
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face and the two plasti-eyes stared back persistently but without the slightest hint of insolence. This one, at least, remained faithful to his original programming.

Or did he? Benson sipped his coffee (perfectly blended as ever), as he watched the impeccably butler-tailored back retreating to the door. There was no special reason they could not get to Hubert. In fact, it seemed now that there was no reason why they could not get to any of their fellow creatures, no matter what the original programming. Hubert's well-regulated face could be as amenable as ever at the very moment he leaned forward, thumb nail properly tilted to slit his master's throat from ear to ear.

The situation, theoretically impossible, had been speculated upon so long that now, even though actually existent, it seemed like some mere word trick of those ancient fictioneers and metaphysicians who had found their greatest pleasure in toying with the impossible. From Dr. Frankenstein to Norbert Weiner and beyond there had been the idle speculation about man's creations taking over from man. But the proper precautions had always been observed—any robot thinking revolt had lost the capacity for thought itself, a self-regulating cutoff mechanism.

Not so perfect, though, nowadays. For the past two years there had been an increasing number of master-murders without any feedback destruction in the responsible machines. *Because no single robot had conceived the idea of revolt.*

NOW, for the past few months, increasing numbers were abandoning their places of work and congregating in strategically scattered strongholds for guerilla forays, hit and run tactics, against people unaccustomed to physical struggle. Each day the red stains of rebellion inched onward, like overstuffed amoebas, on the telenews maps. Within those darkened, antiseptic zones no cell of life persisted; robots needed neither human slaves nor biological food.

This was the problem to wrestle with, Benson sighed, gazing into the bottom of his coffeecup as if the grains there could spell out an effortless solution for the man who had the key to their chaotic code. It was the problem to which all human beings on Earth and the dependency planets were supposed to be devoting every waking hour. Each being a vast repository of history's cultures, thoroughly self-indoctrinated in every art and science during his centuries of gentle leisure. Someone should have had an answer by now.

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But the only response had been a vast failure of nerve, a desire to make the threat disappear by ignoring its existence. Many had managed to disregard the future by concentrating all their thinking on some obscure aspect of the past, a period of particularly beautiful china glazes or a shift in vertebrate jaw structures. Others had found total relief from the thought of metallic hands crushing fragile necks by drugging themselves with twenty-four hour sessions of mathemusic. And a few, like Benson, had become students of their own private selves, studying each minor movement of the mind from one idle speculation to another.

SHOULD I pour myself a second cup? Benson wondered. *Now, then, the problem is really quite simple—they have developed a collective unconsciousness and this overall mechanism gives each captured robot its instructions, pools their separate knowledge for a common effort. Should I pour myself a second cup? Let's see, where was I? Ah yes! all we have to do is find a way to shortcircuit that collective function the way we can make a single decision-creating machine break down. Broad wavefront beams should do that trick—oh no! that's been tried. Have to figure something else.*

SUDDENLY he felt exhausted by the whole thing and leaned back, relaxing pleasantly and returning to that consoling problem about where a man's thought were. "Would you care for another cup of coffee, sir?" There was Hubert again at his elbow.

"Why yes, that would do very nicely."

Once more the unbreakable nail glinted on Hubert's outthrust thumb as he tilted the silver coffee pot but, this time Benson languidly refused to see menace in it. He waved Hubert away and the butler bowed, then moved silently out of the library.

Now, let's see. My thoughts, when I really concentrate on them, don't seem to be anywhere in particular. Suppose I wanted them to seem to be outside of me?

He concentrated, eyes tightly shut. The vague place of thinking floated until it felt as if it were half within him, half somewhere outside. Then the movement stopped.

After an hour of futile effort he resolved on a new tack. He would aim at a precise point one meter directly ahead of him and see if his thinking could seem to come from it. *Now!* There was a sense of some force straining to be completely beyond him but nothing happened.

Maybe I'm trying too much for a starter.

Benson refocussed on a spot

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ten centimeters straight ahead. All of a sudden some mental point gave way and he was experiencing the most peculiar sensation of his long, long life. The part of him that said *I* was no longer inside; it was floating beyond him, just as instructed! For a few minutes *I* watched the body through which it worked, then slowly slid back into its vague usual home.

Fiddling while Rome burns, his conscience warned. At any other time this would have been a wonderful discovery, good for a few decades of pleasant trifling. Now it could only be part of the dangerous drift into race suicide that was going on everywhere.

So he went right back to toying with and refocussing his *I*. A few more trys and he had managed to move it a full meter out. It was an enjoyable thrill that could grow with practise and the devil with being practical! Some machine somewhere was bound to remain loyal and come up with a solution sooner or later.

AFTER another hour the *I* of his being moved about the library, rising and falling at his command, like some metaphysical bird swimming across the dimensions of its private universe. One moment his body shrank in his inner eye, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope, the next it billowed outward to elephantine proportions. *Whee!* he screamed happily, the sound too loud and too high to be produced by vocal cords. *I* zoomed from one end of the library to the other, then swooped a curlicue passage back to the ceiling corner from which it had taken off.

His chubby body rested below him like an object from another galaxy. It moved slowly to the soft pulsing of breath and blood but everything else in the library was perfectly still. . . .

Until the door opened and, looking equally diminished and faraway, Hubert glided noiselessly back into the library. He was moving quickly across the room but with no evident purpose except to see his master at closer range. Then the mechanical hand slowly rose and, like a jackknife springing from its place of concealment, the thumb nail flicked into place.

Horrified, Benson watched his death approaching as if seeing the action in the slowest motion possible without all illusion of movement ending. Suddenly, though, he could no longer remain passive—would there be any place left for *I* to go to if his body died? *That* was one experiment no one alive could risk.

Frantically he refocussed to come to closest grips with the rebellious robot, to be *inside* the very heart of danger. He swooped

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again and he really was there! The next thing he knew body and mind were one again and he was rising from his seat, staring at the crumpled metal figure. His foot cautiously shoved against Hubert's torso, increasing the pressure until the robot fell with a clatter over onto its back. Two melted eyes blankly rested in a contorted face. The whole cunning mechanism had collapsed into junk.

Why? Benson unscrewed the neckplate and peered inside. There, too, organs had fused into dead metal and the precisely frozen cryotron box had melted, its vast information store destroyed.

HE SAT down again, his being invigorated by the narrow escape from death. *Why*, he kept asking himself, *why has this happened?* But, alive as his mind now was, it could find no answer.

Ordinarily he would have just sat there four or five hours, savoring the chance to speculate to no purpose. This time, though, he managed to sustain a will to act and set the televiewer for Dr. Larkin's apartment thirty stories above him.

There was no answer. It didn't seem likely that Larkin would be away from his apartment—people went out as little as possible these turbulent days. Anyway, as one of the greatest living cyberneticians, Larkin was supposed to be staying at home, thinking intensively about the collective menace. Either he had fallen victim to an attack or—.

Desperately, Benson turned on the Emergency Demand circuit, hoping it had not been tampered with. The viewers in Larkins place all went on. The third screen on Benson's console showed the scientist deep in an escapist fugue, staring at a color symphony. Benson pressed for maximum sound until Larkin was shaken from his intellectual narcosis. "All right, all right," he grumbled, coming toward his own televiewer. "Can't a man even have a little privacy in his own home?"

"Come to my place," Benson shouted. "One hundred and fifty B."

That brought the lean, bitter face completely awake. "Are you crazy, Benson? That is Benson, isn't it?" He peered a while, then nodded. "I've got work to do here. Anyway, it's dangerous to go out in the corridors."

"You've got to risk it."

"Oh, sure, just like that!"

"Look and listen." He turned his camera on Hubert's corpse and repeated everything that had happened in the past few hours. The scientist said nothing but became increasingly agitated as the story went on. "Larkin, don't you believe me? I tell you it happened just that way—only I

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don't know *what* happened."

"I'll be there, I'll be there right away." His skinny hands clutched pleadingly toward Benson. "Don't move out of your place whatever you do. Don't open the door for anyone and when I come on your entry plate let me in right away. Maybe there is some hope after all!"

"What's all this sudden rush about? I didn't mean you had to hurry this much."

LARKIN was too excited to bother turning his set off. He was already half way out the room when he shouted over his shoulder. "Maybe it's nothing but they can't be sure either. You may be the worst danger they've hit yet—they probably know already what's happened and they can't let you live if I'm right!"

"I'm not that spenial," Benson insisted. "I'm sure any human being would have done what I did. I—." But Larkin was already gone.

It would be three or four minutes at most before the older man would reach him but he began to count each second nervously. Suppose Larkin was right? Suppose the collective robot mind would really be working to get him now? Wouldn't that mechanical subconsciousness also be out for Larkin's blood too?

He pictured the spindly fellow being attacked as he rushed into the corridor, then saw him cut down as he went down a bend in the hall, metal madmen springing at him from behind every bush of the hall gardens, then imagined him slashed from behind while waiting for the elevator. *Could I project that far?* he wondered. *Could I really help him?*

Even if it were possible, it would be a terrible gamble, letting the *I* go so far away and leaving the body unprotected. If Larkin were right, *he* was the one who possessed the power of knowledge that had to be saved at any price.

The seconds went by more slowly. Then there was a gap between two of them so interminable that he had to take the chance. Benson focussed every weightless ounce of mental force on the corridor outside Larkin's place and, with a strength born of desperate need, the *I* broke immediately from him, then, like a quantum leap, was at its destination without being anywhere between.

There was Larkin pacing anxiously by the elevator door. Down the long green corridor Benson saw a huge Servile, designed for the coarsest heavy labor, emerge from an apartment and start to lumber menacingly toward the elevator where the dial showed the car was still thirty floors away. Then Larkin, eyes widening with fear and suddenly-re-

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turning defeat, saw the hulking thing approaching too.

Benson lunged toward the Servile and the thing hesitated as if functioning with new-found sophistication of awareness. Finally it turned tail and headed back into the apartment from which it had came.

Larkin leaped into the elevator as soon as the door started to slide open and Benson followed him in. He rode down with the trembling man and accompanied him to the door of 150B. Then he returned to his body and opened the door.

GHASTLY close thing!" Larkin exclaimed, rushing inside and slamming the great door shut. "A Servile came down the corridor toward me—.

"—and then turned tail and went back to the place from which it had emerged."

"How did you know that?"

"I was there."

Shaking, Larkin eased himself into a chair. "Give me a little time to take this in. I feel like everybody else—licked and almost not caring anyway—but this makes a little difference. Look, do you think you could teach me how to do it?"

"You can teach yourself, just a matter of concentration."

"If we could destroy enough individual robots their collective mind would disappear." He rhythmically thumped a row of knuckles into a bony palm.

"Disappear?"

"Absolutely." He leaned forward. "Nobody's ever going to understand what mind really is but we have figured this much out about the robot collective. It did not exist when there were fewer thinking machines. But we made too many that make other thinking machines. At some critical point a few years ago there were suddenly enough of them for another, higher level of mechanically-based mind to emerge. It's like the bombs of the ancients —they didn't explode until a certain critical mass was achieved. If we can destroy enough robots without their striking back effectively their numbers will recede below the critical point and that will be that!"

"But they *can* cope effectively."

"Not necessarily. This emerging thing is still new, feeling its way into full being. If we wait much longer, of course, we'll be *completely* powerless. If—everything's if!—if I could grasp the principle behind what you have been doing we'd have a real weapon."

"You're not going to get a deep insight, not even with all your knowledge, unless you yourself try to project."

"Then let's start right away! But first—you'd better check the corridors."

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"Right." Benson focused again and this time the *I* moved away as easily as if the body had never been its restraining home. It moved out into the corridors and saw one block away down a straight hall three enormous Serviles approaching, the floor buckling beneath their tread. They all carried blasters.

Benson concentrated more intensely than ever and passed from one to the other, each movement of his will ending in a tiny moment of blackout. Soon the three of them lay dead on the buckling floor.

AFTER that he sped through each floor, passing human masters, bloodily gored in their easy chairs, and other places where the butlers still moved obeisantly to their tired masters' commands. In a few apartments where death seemed to be at hand he intervened to destroy the threatening machine. Then he returned to his own place and felt Larkin's skinny fingers clutching at his elbow. "It's all right now," Benson smiled. "We can begin."

Larkin proved to be a difficult pupil and hour after hour he tried with little success to disentangle mind from body. "I can feel something *almost* happening," he said finally, "but it doesn't. I'm not an introspective like you. We'd better get somebody who can pick this up right."

"You *can* do it, Larkin. Otherwise why do you almost get through? You *have* to. You've got the training to profit by the experience even if it takes much longer for you to get there."

"All right," he sighed, "but it's sheer murder." He returned to concentrating on the problem and still nothing happened.

Then, in a split second, he went limp. A minute later his eyes opened and he was smiling. "It happened! I was outside myself and I could move a little there."

"No time for talk," Benson insisted. "Back to work."

An hour later Larkin was more adept at it. "Now," he said, "I'm going to try to get into *your* body."

"No, that's too dangerous!"

"So is trying nothing."

He closed his eyes and suddenly Benson started to shake as if about to collapse. Something was trying to take over within him and in another second he would no longer exist. Instinctively he fought back against the invading factor and it pulled away.

Sweat was pouring over his back as he watched the older man come to. Larkin shook his head in wonder and smiled. "I *know!*" he said. "I'm sure of it."

"You know you could have killed me!"

"No. Any human soul would

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fight off such a threat. But the robot is not *that* sophisticated in its structure. No robot will ever be able to hold it back."

"But *what* is it?"

"Wait until I finish." Larkin took a pencil and started scribbling calculations on some sheets of paper. After a while he looked up. "There's the answer. We should be able to train all men to do it, maybe even design machines."

BENSON was trying to unravel the esoteric calculations. "They've already tried broad wave interference. It doesn't work?"

"Not broad wave, young man, but a very specific one, that's what's needed. When the attacking wave's broad the harmonics cancel out the potentially dangerous factor. Every advanced decision-maker, whether biological or mechanical, functions on the basis of a whole series of carrier waves."

"You mean that my free-floating psyche has been fouling up these robots with an alien alpha?"

"Of course not. Alpha waves, betas and the rest that were the first to be discovered at the dawn of EEG, they couldn't be upset by telepathic superimposition—each receiving brain is so unique in those rhythms that it never even gets to grapple with intruders. I'm thinking of the Tau component that is *always* present as a harmonic in every thought process."

"*Tau* waves? Larkin, that's the one thought wave that's the same for everyone, animal or machine—everyone. How could the imposition of my Tau on another brain's Tau make any difference?"

"That's the beauty of the thing. It's the same and it isn't the same!

"I'm not trying to make a paradox game. The Tau waves are the same because our most delicate mechanisms show them to be. They are not the same because no two things in the universe can be exactly alike. In this case we're dealing with a variation so close to the heart of mental reality that it must remain beyond our instrumental grasp. See what I'm driving at?"

Benson stared at the scrawled sheets. "The invading Tau wave is so much like that of the host mind's that it can come to grips with that mind but it is still sufficiently—if imperceptibly—different to disturb the harmonic unity of that host. And from this tiny alien tremor the frequency shifts ripple outward until the whole psychic function is shattered and along with it the physical seat of that function."

"Which is why the human race is back in business!" **THE END**

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One Long Ribbon

By FLORENCE ENGEL RANDALL

Illustrator ADKINS

From beyond the grave, her husband had given her this house. But as she slowly went mad in it, she wondered if it were a gift, or a vengeance.

FRAN moved into the house with all the possessions she and Chris had accumulated over the years, all the things they had chosen with such care, with such love. They had been sure that, someday, they would have a home. Chris would stop flying and she would call for him each evening at some suburban station with Jamie watching for the train and yelling, "There's Daddy, Mommy. I can see him."

She directed the moving men: "Put the piano over there, please. That easy chair goes next to the fireplace."

She directed Jamie: "Go out and play, darling. There must be lots of children here. You can help me later."

Then, when the furniture was in place and the men had left, she sat down in the living room and stared numbly into space, wanting to cry, waiting for the tears to come. Now, she was sure, they would flow easily and bring peace, release. But nothing happened. She just felt drained and weary, more tired than she could ever remember, more exhausted than she had felt that night almost a year ago when the telegram had come.

She had known what it contained the moment it had arrived. She hadn't opened it for a long time; just held it in her hands, as if by not opening it, she could negate its contents, deny the facts, bring Chris back again.

And then, months after the telegram, the lawyer had given her Chris' letter.

"I COULD NEVER GIVE YOU A HOME," it had said, the handwriting strong and bold like

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Chris, "WE WERE ALWAYS ON THE MOVE—ONE AIR BASE AFTER THE OTHER. I HAVE REQUESTED THAT THEY WAIT A WHILE BEFORE GIVING THIS TO YOU BUT, NOW THE TIME HAS COME WHEN I THINK YOU'LL BE ABLE TO MAKE THE MOVE. THIS HOUSE IS YOURS WITH MY LOVE. LIVE IN IT FOR ME. LIVE IN IT FOR JAMIE AND FOR YOUR OWN FUTURE."

She had memorized his words. She had read and reread the letter so often that it had become almost devoid of meaning. There had never been a house for them before, yet, now that Chris was gone, he expected her to live in this one.

The lawyer had been firm. "It was what he wanted, Mrs. Holden," he had said, the sunlight reflected in his glasses. "He was most explicit. He made all the arrangements about two years ago. He said that if anything happened to him, you must live in this house." He took off his glasses and polished them. "I do hope," he added thoughtfully, staring into space, "that you won't be too lonely there."

THIS was the house! White-shingled, red-roofed, the first house on a winding lane; a lane, curving, rambling, meandering as if it couldn't make up its mind where it was supposed to go. This was the house; the house Chris had chosen, his gift to her. She fell in love with it at once. There was something almost fey about it; a sense of instant recognition that this was home, that this was where she and Jamie belonged.

Searching for Jamie, she stood up and peered out of the window. The lane had been empty, deserted, but, it was as if her appearance was a signal. It was as if her presence at the window had caused the curtain to roll up, the play to begin. Little boys pedalled bicycles; roller skates scraped the sidewalks; the trees waved to the sky and, just next door to her, two women stopped to talk, their voices clear in the spring air.

The lawyer had said, "I do hope you won't be too lonely there."

This wasn't a street for loneliness and grief. This was a street for happiness with the houses like a child's colored blocks set neatly side by side. Chris had seen its life, its happiness and had wanted her to be a part of it. That was why he had bought this house and no other.

She wouldn't disappoint him. She wouldn't withdraw from the life around her. She would join it, become a part of it, give Jamie the home he needed.

Fran put up a pot of coffee just in case someone dropped by to welcome her. She had almost emptied two of the cartons when Jamie came in.

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"Hi, darling," she said, rumpling his hair. Jamie, at seven, was a small edition of Chris; wide, brown eyes, light brown hair and a few freckles trailing across the bridge of his nose. "Thought you were going to help me unpack," she said, "Have fun?"

"It's all right, I guess," he said politely, "if you like a lot of trees."

She grinned at him. "City boy," she teased. "You'll have to get used to living in the country."

"Sure," he said, "It's fine."

Without protesting, he rested after lunch. Fran sat at the table alone, the aroma of the coffee still filling the kitchen. The house was very still. Even the electric clock didn't tick, but moved silently, counting out the minutes, the hours. Outside of her window, outside of her quiet house, the children played and laughed; the women visited back and forth.

Fran felt a little unreal. She hadn't expected a brass band to draw up, the trumpets gleaming in the sunlight, the drums rolling a greeting. She certainly hadn't expected her neighbors to jump up and down, shouting, "Welcome to the Holdens." It was as if no one had noticed the moving van; no one had seen them, no one wanted to see them.

FRAN thought: I'm being foolish. Probably everyone's just being considerate. They may feel it's much too soon to call. Jamie and I will go for a walk this afternoon and surely, someone will stop and greet us.

Feeling more cheerful, she ran up the stairs and paused at the door to Jamie's room. He was lying across the bed, his eyes open, staring at the ceiling.

"Jamie, what's wrong?" She was suddenly anxious. She touched his forehead with her lips. "Are you feeling well?"

"Sure," he said, "Honest, Mom, I'm fine."

"How about taking a walk with me? We can go down the lane and explore a bit."

"There's not much to see," said Jamie, "Just a lot of trees and bushes and rocks. It's going to be pretty lonely here, Mom."

Fran bit her lip. "How can you say such a thing? There are so many beautiful houses. I can hear the children playing and having a marvelous time. I saw them roller-skating just a little while ago. Why don't you unpack your skates?"

He sat up and stared at her. He touched her hand. "I'll go if you want me to," he said, but his eyes were frightened.

She was puzzled. "Jamie—"

"I'm ready right now." He stood up. "Let's go," he said and ran down the hall, down the steps.

She followed him slowly, wondering why he suddenly seemed

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so strange, so remote. Was he thinking of Chris too, missing him, longing for him?

She closed the front door behind them and they walked down the path together. They turned to the right. The sidewalk was blocked by three little boys playing marbles.

"Excuse me, please," said Fran.

"No quitsies, no changies," said the snub-nosed boy.

"No back fires, no side fires," chanted the second.

"Hello," said Fran, smiling, "We've just moved in."

"No richochets," said the third boy, ignoring her.

Jamie tugged at her hand, "Please, Mom."

"It's all right, darling," said Fran, "I'm sure they'll become more friendly after a while."

"Who?" said Jamie.

"The children," said Fran, impatiently. "Really, Jamie."

"Mom," he whispered, "I don't see any children."

She stared at him. "Darling, what are you saying? They're right over there. Can't you see?"

"Oh, sure," he said, his voice quivering, "I didn't at first but now I do." He patted her arm with a strangely adult gesture of reassurance. "Maybe we ought to go home," he said.

"I want to walk," said Fran stubbornly. She was suddenly, inexplicably very frightened.

The boys never looked up. They behaved as if she and Jamie didn't exist, as if they neither saw nor heard them, their eyes intent on their game, their litany.

What rude children, thought Fran. Perhaps, that's why Jamie was behaving so oddly; he had never encountered rudeness before. He didn't know what to do except pretend it didn't exist.

WHAT rude grown-ups, she thought a moment later. Two women had passed, their eyes staring through her, ignoring Fran's friendly nod.

She felt a sudden chill although the day was warm and sweet with May. Magnolias were in bloom and a crab apple splashed pink against the sky. In the distance a lawn mower whirred. Jamie blinked in the sunlight.

I must be imagining this, thought Fran; it couldn't possibly be real. It was as if the entire street was determined to ignore her, as if the entire street had banded together, united in their snub.

But why? What had they done?

She turned back without a word, still holding Jamie's hand, finding comfort in the firm clasp of his fingers.

There was a man on the lawn of the house next door to hers. He was painting, his canvas propped against a rock. He stared

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into the distance, his back toward her.

It would be quite simple. She would walk right up to him and say, "I'm Fran Holden. I just moved next door to you and I wanted to say, 'hello'."

She tugged at Jamie's hand but he broke away and ran toward their house. She watched him go, startled, moved uncertainly in his direction, and then, turned and walked resolutely across the lawn.

Fran cleared her throat.

THE man kept on painting, absorbed. His dark hair was cropped short; his ears lay flat against his head, his hands were brown and strong. She peered over his shoulder with the feeling of unreality flooding through her again. He was finishing, with quick brushstrokes, the portrait of a woman; a woman who stood erect against the backdrop of the sky, her skirt blowing in the breeze, her eyes slitted in the sun.

Fran took a deep breath and ran away, ran after Jamie, running, seeking, searching for the cool safety of her house. She had recognized the portrait; had stared at it unbelievingly and then, had done the only thing left to do. She had fled.

The woman on the canvas with the red lips smiling, the blue eyes shining with happiness, had been Fran.

NO," she said aloud, shutting the front door behind her. "No, it's impossible." She leaned against the door, braced against it, her legs trembling.

It had been someone else. Someone who resembled Fran; someone who looked enough like Fran so that a slip of the brush, a touch of color in the wrong place, gave the illusion that it had been Fran, herself, who had posed for the picture.

Was it because she was so tired that everything was so strange, so disoriented? She just wasn't seeing things in their proper perspective. They would have an early dinner and go to sleep, and, in the morning, everything would be normal and usual. They would become part of the street. They would belong there. The faces would be friendly; they would be made welcome. Chris would never have chosen a house, would never have chosen a street that would hurt them in any way.

"LIVE IN THIS HOUSE," he had written, "FOR YOUR FUTURE."

For her future. She thought of the years still ahead of her, the interminable years without love, walking alone, living alone, watching Jamie grow, always alone, never to share the joy of him.

They ate their dinner in silence, seated at opposite ends of the kitchen table; Jamie, still troubled, still frightened and

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withdrawn. She wanted to comfort him and fumbled, seeking, hoping for the right words.

"We'll do better tomorrow," she said, clearing the table, "It'll be much better tomorrow, Jamie. We'll shop at the stores and stock up on things and then, we'll go to the school and register you. You'll be happy here, darling, you'll see."

She tucked him in bed and then moved through the lonely house, not able to stay in one place, walking through the silent living room, the quiet hall.

Next door, the lights blazed and the sound of music drifted through the open windows. She could hear a woman laugh and then, the deep, answering murmur of the man. Those were her neighbors, living in a house that was filled with lights and laughter and music.

Fran opened her front door and moved silently across the path. She walked toward the house next door, across the wet, newly sprinkled lawn, her hands outstretched, as if she were pleading. She stood in front of their house, watching, aching with unbelievable longing, wanting to move toward it, and yet, fearful of being turned away, of being rebuffed.

IT would be so wonderful if she could press that doorbell and enter that house and feel the laughter and the music envelop her, warming her. She had never felt so cold, so set apart, so isolated.

Searching for courage, she took a deep breath and walked slowly up to the house. She reached for the doorbell, but before she could touch it, the man opened the door wide and peered into the darkness as if he were searching for someone. He stood next to her, so close that if she moved her hand, she could have touched him. She looked up at him, for he was very tall, but he didn't see her. His eyes stared through her.

She shivered. "Please," she said, "Oh, please."

"Steve," called the woman's voice, "Steve, what are you doing?"

It was a voice oddly familiar, a little distorted, a little muffled, as if Fran, herself, had spoken and this was the echo.

"I keep wondering," said the man, his face bathed in moonlight, his lips curving tenderly, "I keep wondering just when it happened. I keep wondering what I could do to help. But, at the same time, Fran, I'm afraid. I don't want to change anything. I don't want to change what we have now."

"Come in, quickly," said the voice, "Oh, please, darling, because I'm afraid too."

And there was a hand placed

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on his tanned arm, the long, white fingers curving gently, possessively. "Please, darling," and he went into the house and shut the door.

Fran stood frozen on the steps. She was having a nightmare. This is the way a nightmare begins; the thudding heart, the sudden terror, the legs that just won't obey. She was really lying in her bed, sound asleep, dreaming.

She had dreamt this walk across the wet grass and the woman's shadow on the blinds and the strong, hard planes of the man's face. She had dreamt she had heard the sound of her own voice calling from within a strange house.

FRAN forced herself to move, to walk quietly back to her own house, to lock the door, turn out the lights and behave like any normal householder closing up for the night.

She wouldn't think about it. She wouldn't allow herself to think about it. That way lay madness and gibbering terror.

She forced herself to undress, shower and get into bed. She lay very quietly, trying to think about Chris, trying to think of Jamie, trying to think of anything but this winding lane on which her house was built, the house Chris had chosen.

Rembering Chris, she moved back through time to bring him close to her; the gentleness, the warmth and kindness of Chris. Why had he chosen this house for her? Chris had never done anything without a reason. Why this particular house? Had he known what she would feel here, experience here? Was this what he had wanted for her?

Or was she dreaming even through the daylight hours, as she had pretended she must be dreaming that night? Did the street exist? Was it really there or were she and Jamie suspended in some dreadful limbo, their only existence a swing on the pendulum of time and space, not belonging anywhere?

After a while, she fell asleep, her arm over her eyes, trying to close out the world, shut out her loneliness.

THE next morning, the sunlight sparkled, the birds sang and even Jamie seemed more like himself, eager to get into the car with her, eager to get to the school.

The school was new, redbricked. It smelled of chalk and fresh paint.

The principal was cordial. "Mrs. Holden," she smiled, "I want to welcome you to our community. We do hope you'll be very happy here."

Fran smiled back, smiled at another human being, smiled at

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this friendly, plump little woman who actually saw her, who heard her, who spoke to her. Everything seemed suddenly delightful, very sharp, very clear; the shining desk, the fly buzzing at the window, the yellow roses in the white vase.

"Thank you," said Fran, "I'm sure we will."

"You live on the lane, don't you? It's so pretty out there."

"Yes," said Fran, "It is."

"Of course, you'll be rather lonely for a while."

"Why should I be lonely?" Fran said carefully, "Do you know why?"

The principal looked startled. "Well," she said, uncertainly, "If you don't know why, Mrs. Holden, then, you must be a very self-sufficient person indeed."

"Please," said Fran, leaning forward, "I wish you'd—"

"Excuse me," said the principal, picking up the 'phone. "I'm always being interrupted by calls just when I'd like to settle down for a nice long chat. I think it would be best to start Jamie fresh in the fall. I'm sure he'll be very happy here and we'll be very happy to have him."

Fran was dismissed.

She delayed the trip home as long as possible. She shopped in the supermarket; Jamie pushing the cart. She loaded the car and drove through the town. Finally, reassured, she started back along the rutted, country road that led to her house.

EACH person she had met that morning had been friendly. She had her identity once again. She was Fran Holden and next to her sat her son, Jamie. They lived in the first house on the lane and everyone in town who had met them, had smiled at them.

If there was anything wrong, it was with the street not with her, not with Jamie.

Fran parked the car in the driveway. She worked in the house for the rest of the day, cleaning, straightening, unpacking. She ignored the street, closing her ears to the sounds of the laughing children, the voices of the mothers, the noises from next door.

Jamie followed her about, handing her things, opening cartons, making no move to go outdoors. She didn't urge him. If she couldn't face the street, what was it like for Jamie?

She turned to him suddenly, not meaning to say it but the words spilling out in spite of herself.

"Darling," she said, "What do you see when you look outdoors?"

His eyes were troubled. "What do YOU see, Mom?"

"Please, Jamie." Fran sat down and pulled him toward her. "Please tell me. You said you saw

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nothing but trees and rocks and bushes. Don't you see anything else?"

He shook his head.

"No houses?" asked Fran. "No people? No children?"

"I think I ought to go upstairs," said Jamie quickly. "There's something I've got to do."

"Jamie!"

He put his head on her shoulder. "You said you saw people, Mom," he whispered. "There was no one there."

Fran released him and stood up. She went to the sink. She let the cold water run and took a drink. It was icy against the back of her throat.

"Jamie, darling," she said gently, "Right now, there are people walking past our house. Right now, there's music coming from next door. And yet, you see nothing, hear nothing?" She clasped her hands. She mustn't frighten him. "Perhaps I'm mistaken," she said, keeping her voice light, "But that's what I see."

Jamie backed away. "I really have to go upstairs," he muttered, and ran.

She mustn't question him. She mustn't do that again. She would have to leave this house—for her own sanity, for Jamie's.

She saw the neat, manicured lawns, the carefully planned flowergardens. She saw children whirling past; she heard the thump of a ball slammed by a bat; she heard a mother calling her child.

He saw the woods; the trees stretching green and tall; the brown rocks, the grass growing wild.

This was no house for her. Chris had been wrong. But it had been his gift to her. How could she turn her back on Chris?

THE doorbell rang and she stood still for a moment, shocked, immobile. Someone was standing on her front steps. Someone was ringing her bell.

She opened the door.

It was the man who lived next door. He stood tall on her steps, his eyes, brown like Chris', alive with dancing lights.

"I'm Steve Marshall," he said.

Fran was filled with happiness. A wave of it flowed through her, making her dizzy, making her weak with joy. It had been so long since she had felt this way.

"Please, come in," she said, opening the door wide, "Jamie," she called, "We have a visitor. It's our next door neighbor."

Jamie came down the steps, his hands in his pockets, his eyes alert and wary.

"Hi," said Steve, holding out his hand, "I'm glad to know you."

They shook hands gravely, soberly, studying each other. Jamie smiled.

"I'm Fran Holden," she said,

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holding out her own hand. "I've been meaning to call. I did want to meet your wife."

This was reality; the warmth of the sunlight on her bare arms, the way his teeth gleamed white when he smiled.

"I'd like you to meet my wife if I had one," he said, "I just wanted to stop by and tell you that your isolation is over."

"I was sure it wouldn't last," said Fran. "It was some sort of a joke, then?" She tried to laugh. "I'll have to admit I've been pretty lonely here." Then, as the full significance of his words struck her, she said, "But, I don't understand. You do have a wife. I heard you talking to her last night."

He frowned, puzzled. "I wasn't here last night," he said slowly, "I just stopped by today to tell you that the bulldozers will be ripping the place up soon. I'm the architect for the new development we're going to build."

FRAN backed away, reaching for Jamie. She touched his shoulder, and then moved uncertainly into the living room.

The two of them followed her; the tall man and the little boy.

The man spoke quietly, gently, as if he knew she was frightened, as if he knew of her confusion and wanted, somehow, to comfort her.

"It will be a beautiful street," he said gently, "We're going to follow the natural contours of the land. The street will curve and wind and we'll leave all the tall trees."

Fran stared at him, "This is the way it's going to be?"

He nodded, trying to understand.

"The house next door will be sprawling and low and you're going to live in it yourself," she said, not asking a question, simply stating the fact.

"It will be sprawling and low." He grinned. "I didn't know I was going to live in it, though. Are you telling fortunes today?"

Fran leaned back and smiled at Jamie. "The houses will look like building blocks and there will be lots of children here." She looked up at Steve. "The house next door to you will have three children. Two boys and a girl."

He frowned. "They just bought from the plans," he said. "How could you know?"

"I can't explain right now," she said, "I just do."

Somehow, she was no longer frightened.

Exhilarated, she stood up and ran to the front door. The street still lay stolid, real before her eyes. As she watched, it shimmered and seemed to go a little out of focus.

Tomorrow, she thought, when they start to tear up the ground, it will all disappear. I won't see

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it again, not until it becomes real.

Standing in the doorway, she remembered, suddenly, some thing Chris had once said.

"TIME IS LIKE A WINDING ROAD. TO THE MAN ON THE GROUND, THE FUTURE LIES HIDDEN, BLOCKED BY A CLUMP OF TREES; THE PAST, BEHIND HIM, DISAPPEARING AROUND THE BEND. TO THE MAN IN THE PLANE THE ENTIRE ROAD LIES EXPOSED, ONE LONG RIBBON UNWINDING, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE CLEAR AND IN VIEW."

Chris had been the man in the plane watching from above, the road of time, the lane, winding beneath him.

Now, she knew why he had chosen this house. He had known. This was what he had wanted for her. Had he also known that through some miracle she would be able to see it too?

Steve touched her shoulder. "You know," he said, his eyes thoughtful, "just the way you look right now—someday, I'd like to paint you."

She smiled at him, drawing Jamie close to her. "You will," she said, with wonder, "and it will be beautiful."

THE END

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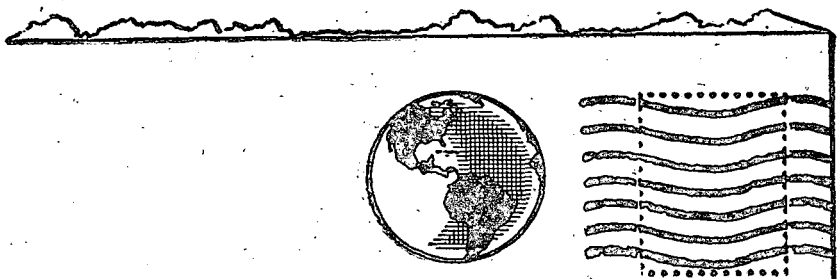

According to you...

o *Herewith a fascinating communique re Mervyn Peake ("Titus Groan") from a close friend:*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I was interested to note your comment on the novel "Titus Groan" by Mervyn Peake and was pleased by the reaction it received in the letter column of your April issue.

I have long been an admirer, friend and drawer-of-inspiration-from of Mervyn Peake and am the author of a couple of 'Appreciations' of Peake. Thus I was more than pleased to see that the editor of what is now my favorite U.S. fantasy magazine also enjoys him as a novelist.

For over three years Mervyn Peake has been almost totally incapacitated by a serious nervous illness which makes it seem unlikely that the projected sequel to "Titus Alone" will ever appear. Although the third volume of the 'Titus' trilogy was very different (in that it left the confines of Gormenghast) to the preceding volumes it is in some ways better than the others. However, in the final chapters one can observe a different quality of unreality and when you know that Peake was suffering greatly from his illness at the time he wrote them, it is understandable that this should be apparent.

I note there has been no mention of the collection which Ballantine published a while ago—"Sometime, Never"—which was a reprint of the volume published by Eyre and Spottiswoode in this country. "Sometime, Never" contained novelettes by Peake, William Golding and John Wyndham. "Boy In Darkness" could be called an extension of "Titus Groan," although it does not fit into the pattern of the trilogy

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and was written as an independent story especially commissioned for the volume. Peake's story appeals most strongly to me, but all the stories are examples of the fine tradition of English fantasy which seems to have declined somewhat in recent years but, I feel, is at last beginning to re-emerge.

Pat Scott, who appears to share my taste in fantasy (although I, personally, appear to have a high opinion of Fritz Leiber's Mouser/Fafhrd stories) calls "Titus Groan" a "Gothic" fantasy and continues, "In fact, it's *the* Gothic fantasy. You can't really know the meaning of Gothic if you have never read Peake's work." I beg to differ here. Peake was astonished when the American publisher of "Titus Groan" labelled it 'A Gothic Romance'. I, also, was surprised when one or two reviewers in this country also dubbed it a Gothic.

In the past I have made a study of the Gothic novel from Hugh Walpole's "Castle Of Otranto" through Radcliffe, Lewis *et al.* to Bram Stoker's "Dracula." All of these works have seemed to me unhealthy, subjective and, for all their horror, lacking in 'marvellous invention' (there are exceptions and, as well, I would not include Walpole's novel under these descriptions).

The thing which appeals to me so much in Peake is that for all his use of grotesque situations, bizarre characters and 'purple prose' he uses all this objectively, far more, for instance, than his old friend and admirer Dylan Thomas did in his surrealistic fantasy stories. Peake's rhetoric has the same lucid, detached objectivity to be found in Shakespeare and, indeed, I have often thought Steerpike a closer (in some ways more subtly delineated) second to Richard the Third than any other villain in literature. I have never put this to Peake, but Steerpike (even in so far as physical appearance goes) might well have been based on Richard. If you can call "Macbeth" or "Richard III" 'Gothic fantasies' (with their surfeit of ghosts and witches) then, I suppose, the same label can be put on the 'Titus' trilogy. I realize that I am going out on an old and creaking literary limb by making comparisons with Shakespeare, but the truth is I can only find the same qualities of combined High Romance and intellectual stimulation in the works of Shakespeare.

Perhaps I overrate Peake, but if this is so I can defend my assertions by saying that, insofar as the general public is concerned, he has for too long been underrated or ignored. In my own experience I have found many people who have never

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heard of him (though all the 'quality' magazines and newspapers in this country have praised his books highly at some time) but when they have read him on my recommendation have been as enthusiastic as I. To read and then meet Peake is to realize that here is a genius.

And the genius, sadly, will probably never write another book again. He has used up his mental and physical energy in creating plays, stage designs, novels, portraits, poetry and illustrations and is now incapable either of concentrating his mental powers or his physical energies. Many friends believe that he will never produce anything more than a few drawings again, but I get the impression, in the face of all the medical evidence, that he is resting, recovering his powers. Perhaps this is wishful thinking on my part.

Peake, incidentally, has read very little fantasy and although I have often recommended fantasies by modern American writers (such as Leiber, de Camp, Pratt or Anderson) he has not as yet read any. He writes in a different tradition than do we poor SF and Fantasy authors—the old tradition of English fantasists which has given us Swift, Walpole, Dunsany, Machen, Blackwood, Wells and, lately, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, T. H. White and J. R. R. Tolkien. It is different in that almost all of these writers independently created fantasy worlds having no knowledge (at one time, of course, it didn't exist) of the main mass of fantasy fiction. They created their fantasy worlds and situations for a purpose, because in them they could best express what they had to say. Unlike myself or other modern SF and Fantasy writers, they did not first decide to write fantasy and then wonder what kind of fantasies they were going to write. I'm not expressing myself very clearly, today . . .

Possibly it's the shock of seeing three letters about Peake in one magazine.

Since I'm on the subject, though, I'd like to add that there are American writers who have obviously begun writing fantasy for the same reasons (Cabell, for instance and Mark Twain) and, certainly in the Gothic tradition (which I find somewhat distasteful nowadays) Edgar Allen Poe was far better than almost any of the English Gothic writers—a little less gloomy self-pity (so obvious in many a gloomy Romantic like Lovecraft or Howard for instance) and a little more objectivity and Poe would have transcended the genre to have produced stories even better than those we have.

Perhaps the reason I prefer Leiber's Mouser stories to any

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others in the Sword and Sorcery genre is that the sackcloth and ashes, the sorrow and misery, the 'Woe is me and you too, Jack' is missing entirely and is replaced by a clever use of dialogue and a detached, ironic humoressness which contains all the tricks that Dunsany ever taught us—and goes one better for, in truth, I prefer Leiber at his best any day to Dunsany who, like Wilde and Thomas at their worst, often overembellished or else, very often, wrote nothing but embellishment—decoration with nothing beneath it, not even a simple plot line.

The Americans, whether fantasists or mainstreamers or humorists, have taken irony away from England, it seems, for good. When they are good they are very, very good and when they are bad they are readable.

By a coincidence, it seems, both magazines which deal primarily in fantasy fiction (FANTASTIC in the U.S. and SCIENCE FANTASY here) are improving tremendously. It is not simply that they are publishing more 'genuine' fantasy—but the standard of the material has improved both in style, ideas and presentation. Now that it is possible to buy FANTASTIC and AMAZING regularly over here, I look forward to being entertained and stimulated at least once a month. I also note that quite a few of your contributors these days are British—this appeals to the old chauvinist in me . . .

I will show Mervyn the comments which you and your readers have made of his work—it will do him a lot of good, I know. In publishing these letters, you will have helped encourage him and perhaps aided him to struggle out of his illness. Let's hope so.

Michael Moorcock.
18, Beatrice Ave.,
Norbury
London, SW. 16, England

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

Those interested in the works of Mervyn Peake can purchase them from:

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22 Henrietta Street
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Price is $8.50 in American money for all three books, including postage to the States. (Books involved are "Titus Groan," "Gormenghast," and "Titus Alone.")

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Sharon Towle
325 Great Mills Lane
Lexington Park, Md.

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Dear Miss Goldsmith:

Well, now you've gone and done it. Put out an issue with not a single objectionable thing in it.

The April cover was eminently approvable; it's getting so lately I sort of wince inwardly in anticipation before I can bring myself to look at the covers on my favorite reading material. Some sort of plague is sweeping the editors and publishers lately that makes them blind to anything but a spacesuit for the cover illustration. Why they think we should be interested in gazing at one spacesuit after another I can't imagine.

The last instalment of the serial "Joyleg" was not quite up to par with the opening one; I had sort of expected all kinds of interesting sieges and what not. The Grand Old Man holding off all of the armed forces in the whole nation certainly wouldn't have been any more unbelievable than that bit of the two governments giving up their atomic might. In fact the latter I just could not quite bring myself to swallow. But the writing was good, and I wasn't too disappointed.

Pat Scott
Box 401
Anacortes, Wash.

● *Wait till you see the August cover. It's not only out of this world, but all worlds.*

Dear Editor:

Fritz Leiber, one of our finest writers, can be rest assured *this* reader felt, upon reading his "A Bit of the Dark World" in the February issue of FANTASTIC, not only a "spine-tingling scare," but also awed wonderment. This story fascinated me; bewitched me!—scared me, possibly beyond dimension. We *must* have more stories like this from Mr. Leiber!

Bill R. Wolfenbarger
602 West Hill Street
Neosho, Missouri

● *A Leiber novelet that goes back to the earliest days of the Grey Mouser will appear in the October issue.*

Dear Editor:

Some compliments are due on your April issue of FANTASTIC. Barr's cover, I must say, certainly was quite good for a first. The style reminded me somewhat of Summers, only neater—maybe more like Vernon Kramer. What happened to Kramer anyway? A year ago you had two very excellent covers by him and then he was never heard from again.

Bob Adolfsen
9 Prospect Ave.
Sea Cliff, N. Y.

● *A Kramer cover—a real stunner—will adorn the August issue of* Fantastic.

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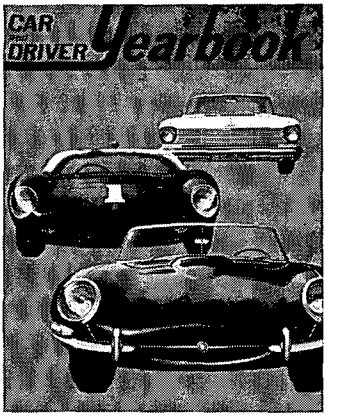

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